DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 968 PS 029 741

AUTHOR Conti, Michael
TITLE How Parents Explain Academic Failure.
PUB DATE 2001-05-00
NOTE 87p.; Dissertation in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor in Education, University of Malta.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses (040)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Failure; *Attribution Theory; Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; *Failure; Foreign Countries; *Parent Attitudes; *Parents; Self Esteem; Theories
IDENTIFIERS Malta

ABSTRACT

This study examined the factors to which parents attribute their children's academic failure. Participating in the research were 13 parents, all living in Malta. About half of the parents' 41 children (ranging in age from 6 to 17 years) had experienced failure in school examinations. Almost all the parents were from a low socioeconomic background. The study drew on Weiner's attribution theory and Bourdieu's cultural capital theory--with its concepts of symbolic violence, cultural capital, habitus, and social and cultural reproduction--to explain why parents attributed failure to such factors. Based on grounded theory, the study used semi-structured, focused interviews to collect data. Findings indicated that parents' internal attributions consisted of: (1) pupil actions such as untidy handwriting and truancy; and (2) internal characteristics, mostly demotivation, lack of ability, the child's character, and a low self-esteem. External attributions were comprised of: (1) the parents themselves, including unfavorable home conditions and parental attitudes of lack of encouragement; (2) the teachers, including their personal problems, their attitudes of lack of acceptance, lack of care, and lack of encouragement, and their actions toward pupils and parents, such as hitting and insulting pupils and lack of parent-teacher collaboration; (3) the educational system, both at a school level through the quest for prestige, lack of discipline, and the headteacher's lack of acceptance, and on the national level through examinations, streaming, increase in syllabus content, pupil-to-teacher ratio, and the lack of help by the Department of Education; and (4) other external factors, such as bullying, other parents' interference, the town culture, and luck. (Contains 64 references.) (KB)

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at the University of Malta.

May, 2001

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ABSTRACT

Michael Conti

How Parents Explain Academic Failure

This study examines the factors to which parents attribute failure. The sample consists of 13 parents, all living at Hal-Minsi, whose children experience or have experienced failure in school examinations. Almost all the parents came from a low socio-economic background. The qualitative research method used is Grounded Theory and the data collection method used is semi-structured, focused interviews.

Parents' internal attributions consist of: (a) pupil actions such as untidy handwriting and truancy, and (b) internal characteristics, mostly demotivation, lack of ability, the child's character, and a low self-esteem. External attributions comprise: (a) the parents themselves, involving unfavourable home-conditions, and parental attitudes of lack of encouragement and build up of pressure; (b) the teachers, in this case, their personal problems, their attitudes of lack of acceptance, lack of care and lack of encouragement, and their actions towards pupils and parents, such as hitting and insulting pupils and lack of parent-teacher collaboration; (c) the educational system, both at a school level through the quest for prestige, lack of discipline, and the headteacher's lack of acceptance, and on the national level through examinations, streaming, increase in syllabus content, pupil to teacher ratio, and the lack of help by the Department of Education; and (d) other external factors, such as bullying, other parents' interference, the town culture, and luck.

The study draws on Weiner's attribution theory and Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, with its concepts of symbolic violence, cultural capital, habitus, and social and cultural reproduction, to explain why parents attribute failure to such factors.

B. Ed. (Hons.)

May, 2001

Keywords:

achievement **attribution** **educational system**

failure **parents** **self-esteem**

I, the undersigned, do hereby declare that I am the author of the dissertation entitled "How Parents Explain Academic Failure" being presented in part fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Education (Honours) at the University of Malta.

I do further confirm that this dissertation is an original and unpublished work.

Michael Conti
B. Ed. (Hons.)

May, 2001

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Prof. Ronald G. Sultana for helping me focus on the major areas involved in this research, for his accompaniment throughout the working out of the dissertation and for his challenge to integrate theoretical frameworks with the reporting of data.

I would also like to thank my family for their support throughout the time I spent working on my dissertation.

A great thanks goes to the director of St. Peter Institute of Hal-Minsi, for his encouragement and for his invaluable help in finding out and contacting participants for this research; as well as to the participants who offered their time to make this research possible and for sharing with me their, very often sad, experiences.

Thanks also goes to Ms. Lara Said for lending me her Master's dissertation for consultation.

Thanks to Fr. Patrick Magro s.j. for providing me with the articles I needed from abroad in a very short span of time.

Dedicated to the children who fail
as a result of the injustice of the system

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Chapter 1

Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

Owing to my connection with St. Peter Institute at Hal-Minsi, I came into contact with children who were failing miserably at school and who seemed to be doing worse every year, rather than improving. Moreover such children usually came from low socio-economic backgrounds. This made me question why children who were socially disadvantaged were the ones who failed most at school and who finished schooling labelled as failures. Thus in this study I decided to focus on failure. Moreover, I decided to deal with parental attributions since parents are important agents in children's education.

I searched for literature related to my subject at the University of Malta's library. I also used two CD-ROM databases: PsycLit and Sociofile. Apart from this I searched for literature in the "British Education Index" and the "Current Index to Journals in Education" (CIJE). I also searched the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) on-line where I made use of the "AskERIC" service asking them to provide me with literature related to my dissertation title. However, while finding a number of books and articles related to my subject, I found only a very small number of studies specifically about my topic.

Studies dealing with my area of interest focused mainly on attributions for achievement rather than failure. Moreover, parents' attributions featured in only

five articles (Bar-Tal & Guttmann, 1981; Bonnici & Borg, 1995; Patrikakou, 1997; Ryckman & Mizokawa, 1988; Sacco, Johnson & Tenzer, 1993) and none of these focused solely on parents' attributions. Other studies dealt with teachers' and pupils' attributions. The only research done on attributions in the case of low socio-economic groups was that of Gama and de Jesus (1991) who studied low-income groups.

Therefore this study contributes to research because it focuses on *parents'* attributions, on *failing* pupils, on *attributions* to failure, and on families generally coming from a *low socio-economic background*. Another contribution made by this research is that it seeks to link the psychological attributions with the sociological explanations for such attributions: something that I have not come across in any research I consulted. Before proceeding it would be best to clarify three points.

For this research, *academic failure* is defined as failure on the pupil's part to perform successfully in school examinations. Very often, students who experience academic failure end up in the lower streams and in some cases, repeat at least one academic year.

Secondly, the *educational system* is defined as "all the procedures and methods with their instrumental apparatus, whereby a ... society gives its members organised and controlled education in the various fields of human activity" (Page & Thomas, 1977, p. 115). The educational system is made up of the Education Division, the Ministry of Education and the school administration. Although teachers are part of the educational system, they will be separated from it in this research since they are the concrete link between the institutional educational system and the pupils.

Finally, I used the pseudonym "Hal-Minsi" *[Forgotten town]* as the name of the town in which I conducted this research because I think that a situation such as the one to be described is one that teachers and officials in the educational system would prefer to ignore since it exposes the inadequacy and injustice of the educational system.

1.2 Attribution Theory

Different theorists have tried to group attributions people give to behaviour. Such a theory has been called "attribution theory", the main theoretical framework of which was formulated by Weiner in the 1970s. Said (1994, p. 2) defines attribution theory as one that "investigates the reasons individuals give in order to explain their own or other people's behaviour".

Attributions can be divided into three dimensions: locus of control, stability and controllability. Locus of control means whether the attribution involves internal or external factors, stability means whether this factor is stable or unstable, while controllability means whether the factor is controllable or not. The relationship among these three dimensions is illustrated in figure 1:

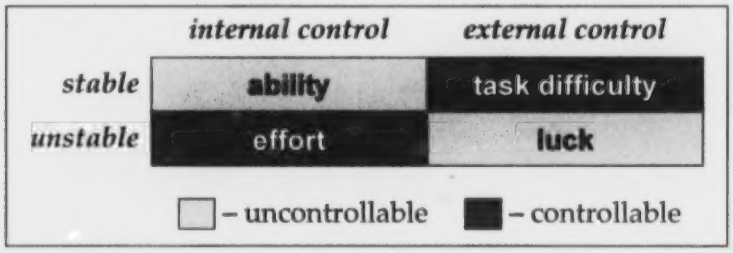

Figure 1
Relationship among the three attributional dimensions.
(source: Weiner, 1974, cited in Said, 1994, p. 2)

Therefore, attributions related to *ability* are internal, stable, and uncontrollable; those related to *task difficulty* are external, stable, and controllable; those related to *effort* are internal, unstable and controllable; and those related to *luck* are external, unstable and uncontrollable.

Bar-Tal and Guttmann (1981) developed a parallel model to differentiate attributions. They divided attributions into *pupil-related, teacher-related, parent-related* and *external* attributions. Although at first glance the two models seem separate, they are actually complementary. Using locus of control as the primary way to distinguish among attributions and seeing locus of control as relative to the child, *pupil-related* attributions are *internal* attributions. On the other hand, *teacher-related, parent-related* and *other-external* attributions are all *external* attributions.

Each group can then be subdivided according to the stability and controllability dimensions as illustrated in figure 2. In my research I shall focus on the locus of control dimension since stability and controllability are not always clear to determine.

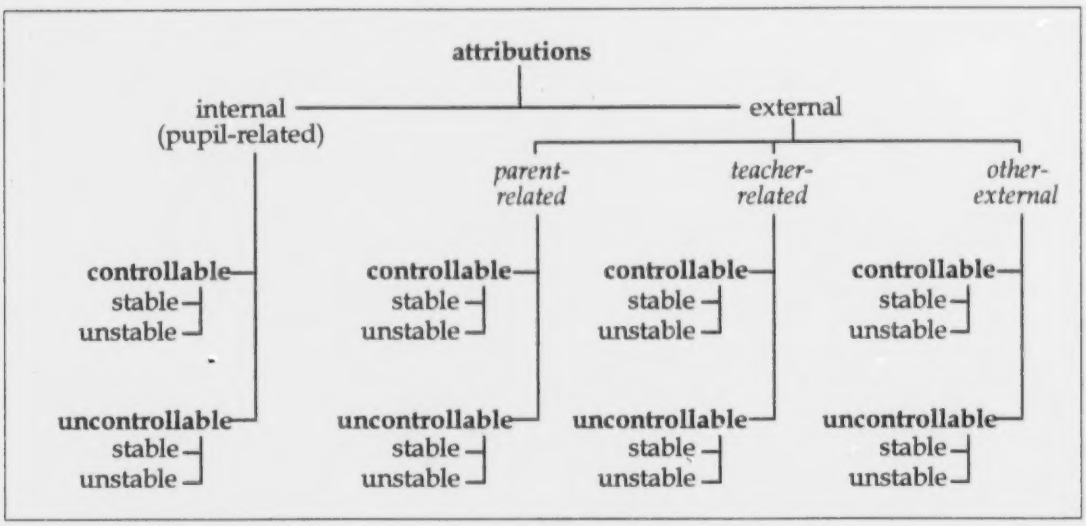

Figure 2
Attribution dimensions according to Weiner (as cited in Said, 1994) and Bar-Tal and Guttmann (1981).

Gretarsson and Gelfand (cited in Miller, 1995) have shown that attribution patterns for failure and success are different, making my study only applicable when it comes to explaining failure. Contrary to what Bar-Tal and Guttmann (1981) found in their research, Gama and de Jesus (1991) and Said (1994) found that in the case of children coming from a low socio-economic status, failure was usually attributed to internal factors. Causal attributions for failure were also stable and uncontrollable. On the other hand, success was attributed to external factors which were also stable and uncontrollable.

"Individuals react to success with a positive affective emotion e.g. pride, happiness, and they react to failure with a negative affective emotion e.g. shame, unhappiness" (Said, 1994, p. 8). However, locus of control affects the intensity of affective response accompanying achievement such that "the more an outcome is attributed to an internal cause the more the affective response is heightened. On the other hand the more the outcome is attributed to an external cause the more

the affective response is reduced" (Said, p. 8). Thus, in the case of children coming from a low socio-economic background, feelings of shame and unhappiness (resulting from a negative affective response) are intensified when attribution to failure is internal. This intensification takes place because internal factors are strongly tied to self-esteem. On the other hand, the positive affective response of pride and happiness accompanying success is diminished as success is perceived as being external.

Thus children coming from a low socio-economic background see themselves as predisposed to failure and therefore hold lower expectations of themselves. Moreover, seeing failure as something stable and uncontrollable implies that nothing can be done about the situation, resulting in a decrease in the expectation of success and an increase in the expectation of failure. This is particularly important to keep in mind because as internal attributions to failure have been made by the participants, it helps one to understand that it is this heightened negative affective response that leads to the lowering of self-esteem in children and subsequent failure as will be seen in section 3.3.4.

1.3 Causes of Failure

Studies have shown that the two major internal attributions to failure are a low self-esteem (Atherley, 1990; Sacco, et al., 1993; Said, 1994) and demotivation (Gama & de Jesus, 1991). Gama and de Jesus state that low self-esteem and demotivation – one producing the other – work together and bring about failure, which in turn negatively affect self-esteem and motivation, thus creating a vicious circle.

However, external factors are also seen to affect academic achievement. Such factors include home conditions (Bar-Tal & Guttmann, 1981; Harris, 1961; Jeon & Feldhusen, 1993), parental expectations (Patrikakou, 1997), marital discord, birth order and expectations of maturity, parental ambition, and aggression (Harris). Social class is also mentioned as "a major predictor of educational ... achievement" (Lareau, 1987, p. 83). Although it is usually found with other external factors, it is so important that were all factors affecting achievement equal, social class would distinguish between high and low achievers. The role of

social class in bringing about failure will be explained in section 1.3.2. Let me first describe the main internal reason for failure.

1.3.1 Self-esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as the feeling that significant adults in one's life accept and care about the person (Katz, 1995). Since the most significant adults in one's early life are parents or carers, socialisation within the family (Bar-Tal & Guttmann, 1981), parental attributions (Sacco, et al., 1993) and parental perceptions of their child (McGrath & Repetti, 1995) greatly influence the child's self-esteem. If parental perceptions of the child are negative, the result is a lowering of the child's self-esteem leading the child to having a more negative view of oneself if he or she experiences failure, or to having a less positive view of oneself if the child experiences success (Sacco, et al.). These negative parental perceptions can be seen when the participants attribute failure to internal factors, most notably child ability. Thus, through their negative perceptions and their attribution to their child's ability, parents facilitate the lowering of children's self-esteem (Atherley, 1990; Said, 1994).

However, parental attributions and the child's achievement are themselves a result of social class. Since children coming from low socio-economic backgrounds usually underachieve, and since low achievement is linked to self-esteem, low socio-economic status and low self-esteem are generally linked together. Thus social class determines achievement (Mifflin & Mifflin, 1982) and achievement influences one's self-concept. This self-concept in turn affects one's achievement. Therefore, failure due to one's social class (as seen in section 1.3.2) results in a lowering of self-esteem that leads to further failure and additional lowering of self-esteem. Parental attributions influence this process by reinforcing the link between social class – of which they are a result – and achievement and self-esteem, as can be seen in figure 17 (p. 68).

1.3.2 Social Class

The functionalist and the conflict paradigms explain the relationship of schooling and achievement to social class in different ways.

Functionalist theory

Functionalism holds that society is "made up of interdependent parts that operate to meet different social needs" (Jary & Jary, 1995, p. 248) thus creating a stable society. Functionalism is based on the notion that the important roles in society should be left in the hands of those who are more able. Due to their role, these people are more privileged than others. This inequality is important because it is functional for everybody in the preservation of the social structure (Mifflin & Mifflin, 1982).

Contrary to the feudal system, important roles are achieved not ascribed. To measure this achievement, academic qualifications are needed which become the main indicator of status achieved (Hurst, 1985). This means that what is important in such a system is equality of opportunity not that of outcome (Mifflin & Mifflin, 1982). The result is a meritocratic system where it is believed that success in education, and thus, any subsequent rise in status, is the result of effort and ability (Sultana, 1989). Moreover, meritocracy sees cultural deprivation, personal inadequacy and lack of effort as the causes of student failure. Thus, meritocratic ideology sees pupils who fail as being deficient in what successful pupils have. According to functionalism this deficiency is found mostly in low socio-economic status groups thus attributing failure of the working class to "lack of parental interest, ... failings of home and neighbourhood, and ... inadequate provision of appropriate cultural experience" (Jary & Jary, p. 137).

This theory has been criticised mostly because it blames failure wholly on personal inadequacy rather than on the unjust social structures, and because it holds that it is the possession of credentials rather than skills that predicts status. For these reasons, especially because of the blame-the-victim approach (Borg, 1997), I chose to look at social stratification and its link with schooling from the conflict theorists' perspective.

Conflict theory

Conflict theorists see society in a constant state of struggle among different groups, for power. However this conflict is unequal because of the élite group's dominance. Contrary to functionalism, authority and prestige are not seen to depend on expertise but on the manipulation by the élite group in such a way as to make people believe that the system is meritocratic and transformative when in fact it is only reproductive, thus maintaining the status quo of the social formation (Hurst, 1985).

Schools are viewed as an essential state apparatus to perpetuate inequality and to convince the working class of their inferiority and deficiency. This is done through credentials which are rewarded to those who acquire the knowledge transmitted by schools. However, this knowledge is that which is deemed valuable by the dominant class (Mifflin & Mifflin, 1982). Thus, contrary to functionalism, credentialling is seen as a way to select people according to their possession of the knowledge that is valued by the dominant class. According to the degree of possession of such knowledge, the person is allocated status and this seemingly meritocratic process is legitimised as necessary for social function (the meritocratic ideology). Therefore, rather than failure being a result of personal inadequacy, this theory sees failure as a result of the working class children's knowledge not being acknowledged as valuable by schools due to the social structure which uses schooling as a means of reproducing and reinforcing power relations between the dominant and the dominated classes.

Conflict theory includes two major schools of thought: the Marxist and the Weberian. The Marxist school emphasises mostly, although not exclusively, economic capital since social stratification is seen to be based on the economic mode of production, mainly the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. On the other hand, the Weberian school looks at social class in terms of economic, social, and political power (Mifflin & Mifflin, 1982). Thus, class does not remain only a matter of financial difference but also one of social and political difference, and therefore of status difference, leading to the formation of "status groups" (Jary & Jary, 1995, p. 655; Sultana, 1994, p. 32).

In his *cultural capital theory*, Pierre Bourdieu, a Weberian sociologist, states that it is the possession and appropriation, and the production and reproduction of cultural capital that determines social class. Bourdieu interprets deprivation in a

different way from the functionalists. He sees groups which are culturally deficient as deficient in culture *that is valued by the school* but who still have their own culture. This is an essential concept in his theory which will be described and then applied later on.

I chose to follow the conflict theory because as I have seen from my contact with children who fail at school and who usually come from the working class, such children are "intelligent underachievers". Therefore, one cannot blame their inability as being the cause of their failure, thus indulging in the blame-the-victim approach as does the meritocratic ideology which influences the way in which some parents explain failure in this study. Furthermore I shall be interpreting class in the Weberian sense since although people with low income usually have low social status, there are others who have a high income but who still have a low social status and therefore still belong to the dominated classes. Furthermore, I shall be using Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital since I have found it to be the most sociologically realistic explanation of school failure and parents' subsequent attributions, as will be seen later on.

What is capital?

"Bourdieu defines capital as those resources whose distribution defines social structure and whose deployment figures centrally in the reproduction of that structure" (Collins & Thompson, 1997, p. 618). Depending on the amount of capital possessed, a person has "the ability to exercise control over one's future and that of others," thus making capital "a form of power" (Calhoun, LiPuma & Postone, 1993, p. 4). According to Bourdieu there are three types of capital: economic, social and cultural. The last two can be grouped together as symbolic capital (Calhoun, et al., 1993).

Economic capital involves a person's financial income. It is the most efficient form of capital because it is the only capital that can be passed on tangibly from one generation to the next as inheritance, its socially institutionalised form. This form of capital can easily be exchanged into symbolic capital whose aim is to

essentialise and naturalise[1] the social positions so as to mask economic domination (Calhoun, et al., 1993). Social capital involves the ability to influence others, and the strength and extent of social networks and connections. This capital is institutionalised in the form of noble titles (Collins & Thompson, 1997). The other form of capital is cultural capital.

What is cultural capital?

Bourdieu defines cultural capital as "the cultural goods transmitted by the different family PAs[2], whose value qua cultural capital varies with the distance between the cultural arbitrary imposed by the dominant PA and the cultural arbitrary inculcated by the family PA within the different groups or classes" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 30). This value is shown in one's "proficiency in the consumption of and discourse about ... institutionally screened and validated ... cultural goods" (DiMaggio, 1991, p. 134). Cultural goods are symbolic knowledge and possessions (Collins & Thompson, 1997) which are themselves instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth (DiMaggio, 1982). The smaller the distance between the two cultural arbitraries, the more valuable are the cultural goods, and the more prestigious is the status group the person belongs to (DiMaggio, 1982).

Cultural capital can be objectified, embodied and institutionalised (Collins & Thompson, 1997; Hayes, n.d.). It is objectified in the form of goods including one's background, social class and commitments to education (Hayes). It ranges from social skills to many features of élite and middle class culture such as books and leisure facilities (Morgan, 1997). Examples of cultural capital possessed by the participants can be seen in figure 12 (p. 34).

At a more fundamental level, cultural capital is objectified in the form of language skills, what Bernstein (1977) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 73) call: "linguistic capital." On one side there is what Bernstein (p. 142) calls "elaborated codes" ("bourgeois parlance" according to Bourdieu & Passeron, p.

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[1] Naturalisation occurs when the existing (established) social positions and relations are portrayed as natural, making the existing social formation seem as the only possible one. Thus, *established* order is seen as *natural* order.
Essentialisation takes place when this social structure is depicted as necessary for the functioning of society. It is most effective if the social formation is seen as natural.

[2] "PAs" stands for "Pedagogic Actions". A pedagogic action is the transmission of symbolic systems, i.e., the symbolic forms through which we construct reality (Bourdieu, 1977b).

115) which are universalistic in nature and which can be understood outside the specific context within which they are spoken. On the other hand there are "restricted codes" (Bernstein, p. 142; what Bourdieu & Passeron, p. 115, call "common parlance") which are particular to a given context in meaning. More importantly, the higher the degree of elaborated codes used, the more cultural capital the person possesses and the higher is the status group the person belongs to. This is one of the means I used to identify the social class of the participants on the basis of cultural capital as can be seen in figure 11 (p. 33) and figure 12 (p. 34).

Cultural capital is embodied as a set of dispositions and attitudes which become particular to the social class or family of the individual, depending on the pedagogic action one experiences. Over time, these dispositions become habitus. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 161) define habitus as "the generative, unifying principle of conducts and opinions". It is "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 86). It is made up of the mental structures (dispositions) through which people deal with the social world (Stickley, n.d.) and which are a result of past experiences (Collins & Thompson, 1997) and serve as a matrix of perception and action (Bourdieu, 1977a) which cohere a social group. It is habitus which decides the relationship between the individual and the social structure and therefore his or her social role (LiPuma, 1993).

Different social classes have a different habitus. Since schools promote the habitus of the dominant class, children coming from the working class, and who thus have a different habitus, experience a cultural shock when they enter school. As a result, the children of the working class see themselves as inferior and lacking in ability. This symbolic violence (see later) leads to underachievement. Thus, when looking at parents' attributions to failure, one must see whether the attributions being made are linked to the parents' class habitus and whether this class habitus affects their children's achievement or whether it affects their attribution patterns.

Cultural capital can also be institutionalised. This institutionalisation can take different forms, a main one being the educational system in the form of credentials. Credentials are the currency of cultural capital such that "academic qualifications are to cultural capital as money is to economic capital" (Bourdieu,

1977a, p. 187). Since achievement implies success in academic qualifications, it is important to look at how the educational system is involved in determining achievement so as to understand better the parents' attributions of failure to the educational system (section 4.5).

Another important concept is that cultural capital must be attained and decoded (Katsillis & Rubinson, 1990). It is not found in a tangible form as economic capital is, so to attain it people must possess the necessary tools. The need for the tools of appropriation leads to manipulation and exploitation in the transmission of cultural capital (Bernstein, 1977) in such a way as to maintain the unequal distribution of cultural capital thus reproducing social class relations. According to Bourdieu, it is in this reproductive process that schools are involved because they use credentials, and thus the meritocratic ideology, as ways of assessing and rewarding the ability of a child to appropriate cultural capital when in fact this is a result of one's class habitus. Participants who attributed failure to internal attributions are parents who have been convinced of the meritocratic ideology and of the naturalisation of their children's inability. I call these parents: "domesticated parents."[3] Those parents who attribute failure to the educational system are those who began to see this reproductive process of schools.

Orthodoxy and heterodoxy: The struggle between doxa and opinion

The class struggle around cultural capital is not the only struggle going on. Underlying this lies another struggle: that between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (Bourdieu, 1977a) and the struggle for control of the tools of appropriation.

Orthodoxy is the work done by the dominant class to keep the tools of appropriation of cultural capital to themselves and to make this cultural possession seem as natural and legitimate, thus avoiding the questioning of their imposition of the dominant cultural arbitrary[4]. This means that they try to portray their domination as doxa, that is, the undisputed area of social relations. They try to create hegemony.

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[3] The term "domesticated parents" comes from the term "domestication" (Freire, 1996, p. 33) which refers to the internalisation on the part of the oppressed of the ideology of the oppressor. In this case it refers to the internalisation of the meritocratic ideology and the dominant ideology (see footnote 6).

[4] The cultural arbitrary is the cultural standard imposed by the dominant pedagogic action, i.e., that which matches the culture of the dominant class.

On the other hand, heterodoxy is the struggle going on to decrease the area covered by doxa by questioning social relations and the legitimacy and naturalisation of the imposition of the dominant class, thereby shifting the imposition of the dominant from the universe of the undisputed to the universe of discourse.

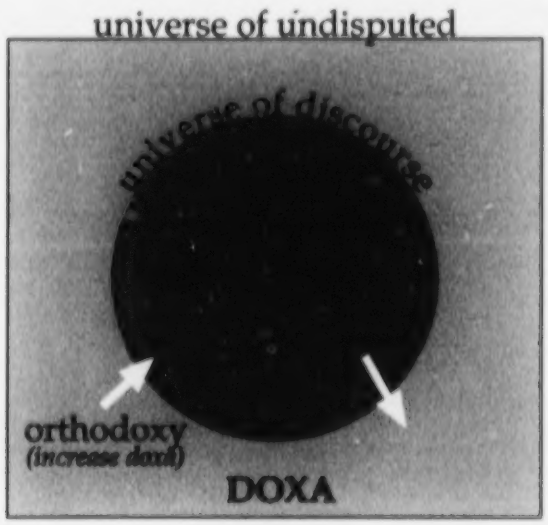

Figure 3
Relationship between universe of disputed and undisputed.
(source: Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 168)

This conflict between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is important because if schools are really in the hands of the dominant class, they are also instruments in the creation of doxa through qualifications and the imposition of the meritocratic ideology. Those parents who have succumbed to the force of orthodoxy by attributing failure to internal factors are the domesticated parents, while those who attribute failure to external factors, especially the educational system, are influenced by the forces of heterodoxy.

Symbolic violence

This drive of orthodoxy to create doxa and the imposition of the system as a natural and legitimate one, thus adopting the blame-the-victim approach, is a form of covert violence called symbolic violence[5] (Bourdieu, 1977b). This violence allows the dominant class to keep its relative social position, aiding in the naturalisation of an established order based on domination. This violence is exerted by imposing the dominant ideology[6] as universal, thus achieving effective integration[7] of the dominant class and bogus integration of the whole of society (Bourdieu), leading to the fragmentation, and therefore loss of power, of all but the dominant class. This difference in integration leads to a marked distinction between the dominant class and the rest of society in the form of a dominant culture and other sub-cultures which are seen to be culturally deprived when compared to the dominant one. This deprivation is however a disguise of the cultural and ideological domination that is taking place (Bourdieu) and which is leading to the domestication of the dominated (Freire, 1996).

The transmission of the symbolic system that favours orthodoxy and domination and which corresponds to the interests of the dominant class is called the "dominant pedagogic action" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 22). It is the imposition of this pedagogic action onto the dominated classes that constitutes symbolic violence.

Symbolic violence is exerted in schools through the process of credentialling and legitimation under the disguise of meritocracy. The dominant pedagogic action's strength and influence punishes those adhering to other pedagogic actions through academic failure, "proving" that dominated classes are culturally deficient. Although, as mentioned in section 1.3.1, it is achievement that affects self-esteem, since achievement is closely linked with habitus and cultural capital,

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[5] Symbolic violence can be defined as the imposition of a (dominant) pedagogic action by one class over another and thus the domination of the former over the latter (Bourdieu, 1977b; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

[6] According to the dominant ideology the habitus of the dominated class is seen as being culturally deficient, rather than as culturally different, when compared to the dominant habitus. Moreover, the dominant ideology sees failure as being the result of the lack of effort on the part of, and the natural inability of, the students who fail.

[7] Integration is the feeling of belonging to a particular social group (Jary & Jary, 1995). Bourdieu (1976a, p. 197) explains this integration as "the deep underlying fellow-feeling that unites the members of the governing classes, despite differences of occupation and economic circumstances."

self-esteem becomes the means by which symbolic violence is exerted onto the dominated classes. This is done by making the dominated classes feel that their failure is due to internal factors, that is, their inability and lack of effort, rather than because of the power structures of society. The effect of perceiving failure as being internal is an intensified negative response and a subsequent lowering of self-esteem.

This point is important because the attributional patterns of parents in this research, especially their emphasis on failure being a result of self-esteem, indicate that such violence is actually taking place. More so, parental attributions indicate that it is because of this violence that their children are underachieving at school.

Social and cultural reproduction

To maintain the current established order, and thus the domination of the dominant class, the power relations in society have to be reproduced. This social reproduction must be brought about in such a way as to mask the imposition of the cultural arbitrary onto the sub-cultures (cultural reproduction).

This masking process implies that social and cultural reproduction must be seen as natural and legitimate. Only in such a way will the dominant pedagogic action have legitimate authority, called "pedagogic authority" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 11), to impose its cultural arbitrary, thus exerting symbolic violence. This legitimation takes place by seeing the possession of cultural capital as natural, compelling those on whom the cultural arbitrary is imposed to internalise the message[8] that they are culturally deprived and, therefore, that their lack of ability is due to their inferior and deficient culture. This turns the focus of the dominated away from the social structure onto their own inability, shifting the locus of control of attributions for failure from external to internal, and enabling cultural reproduction to take place more easily.

Institutionalisation of this process through schooling makes self-reproduction of the system easier first by masking social reproduction through cultural

[8] This internalisation of the idea of one's natural inferiority typical of the dominated classes is part of the process of inculcation of the dominant class, called "pedagogic work" by Bourdieu & Passeron (1990, p. 31). In the case of the educational system, pedagogic work occurs mostly through the hidden curriculum.

reproduction and secondly by eliminating the need for the pedagogic transmitters[9] to constantly affirm their own authority since it is legitimately delegated to them by the institution.

In the case of schooling and achievement this means that through the process of credentialling the school reproduces the cultural capital belonging to each social class by rewarding, through qualifications, the cultural capital of the dominant class and failing the children who possess a "deprived" cultural capital. However, since credentialling is portrayed as being founded on meritocracy, this process of reproduction disguises success as being achieved through ability and effort. This means that those who fail do so because they are *naturally* unable to achieve. This results in their lowering of self-esteem and further underachievement, thus not having the necessary qualifications for social mobility. In such a way social reproduction takes place. This aspect is important especially because when one finds that schooling does not bring about relative social mobility and that the children who underachieve come from the working class – the class with little cultural capital which is considered valuable by the dominant class – then one begins to see the educational system itself as being involved in the process of social reproduction.

The educational system and cultural capital

In this study it is particularly important to understand how the educational system features in Bourdieu's theory since, apart from being central to his idea of cultural reproduction, it was one of the causal factors of failure mentioned by the parents.

The educational system is one of the major institutional forms which legitimises symbolic violence and participates actively, although in a hidden way, in social and cultural reproduction. It is the place where pedagogic work takes place. It is also the site of struggle where the dominant and the dominated classes struggle for recognition of their habitus as the universal habitus. However, since the dominant class already possesses cultural capital that is valued and promoted by schools (this being their own creation) the dominated classes are at a

[9] Pedagogic transmitters are those who have the pedagogic authority to transmit the dominant pedagogic action and to test its inculcation. In the case of academic achievement, the pedagogic transmitters are teachers.

disadvantage. Therefore the school habitus becomes synonymous with the dominant class' habitus while the habitus of the dominated classes is seen as invalid.

The amount of "valid" cultural capital possessed is examined and awarded by the school through examinations and qualifications. Since cultural heritage[10] is recognised as natural (Bourdieu, 1976b) the assessment of such heritage through examinations is seen as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1974; Bowles, 1976). Credentials are described as "irreproachable verdicts" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 167) which serve the interests of the dominant class and which enable the school to reproduce the established order through misrecognition. Since credentials depend on the amount of cultural capital accumulated, which in turn depends on the availability and ownership of the tools of cultural appropriation which are not equally available to all, the result is that academic success is proportioned according to the amount of cultural capital owned by the family. This brings about cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1974). The validity of examinations as objective assessment procedures of pupils' ability is put into question by the participants in this study (section 4.5.2).

Moreover, it is on the basis of academic results that children are physically separated through the process of streaming – a process mentioned by parents as being one of the major external factors leading to failure (section 4.5.2). Separation through streaming enables the school (and therefore the dominant class) to provide different individuals, and different streams, with educational aspirations that are tailored to one's future social role, already greatly determined by one's cultural capital possession (Bourdieu, 1976b; Bowles, 1976). Social role determination is possible because social mobility can happen as long as one is successful at school. Owing to the meritocratic ideology, it is only those who are qualified who can occupy the most prestigious positions in society, but since achievement is determined mostly by social class, children who fail (due to their different cultural capital) remain in the lower strata of the social structure. This means that educational hierarchies, which are a result of social hierarchies, are again changed into social hierarchies. Social mobility of a selected few is used to "prove" that grades obtained at school are objective and fair and that the system is therefore truly meritocratic.

[10] Cultural heritage is the cultural capital that a child inherits from his or her family.

Apart from reproducing inequality by expecting certain cultural capital from the dominated classes which they do not possess, schools also reproduce inequality in another way. The educational system demands from the élite cultural capital which they already possess. Inheriting the necessary tools of appropriation from their families, children of the dominant class are able to decode the cultural arbitrary they receive at school and add it on to the cultural capital they already possess, thus accumulating their cultural capital. Therefore, "children who are exposed to cultural capital may be better prepared to master academic material" (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996, p. 24).

On the other hand, the educational system demands cultural capital from the social groups that neither have the tools to appropriate it, nor the cultural capital itself. Since these groups do not have the tools of appropriation and they do not receive such tools from school (Katsillis & Rubinson, 1990), the cultural capital offered by the school is not accessible to them even though theoretically it belongs to everyone (Bourdieu, 1974).

This leads to cultural reproduction where the cultural capital of those groups which are culturally[11] rich is accumulated, while those groups which are poor in cultural capital valued by the school have no means to appropriate more of it and thus remain culturally "poor". The frustration accompanying this process very often leads to the fostering of an anti-school attitude (Sultana, 1989) in both children and parents. This brings about an actual or symbolic elimination of the children from school. This confirms Bourdieu's (1976b) idea that attitudes towards school define the chances of access to education and therefore the chance to accumulate more cultural capital.

Since in a meritocratic society achievement is attributed to internal factors, through the symbolic violence shown above, the dominated classes are encouraged to be realistic, that is, to recognise their inability and thus their inevitability to fail. This experience of failure accompanied by negative affective emotions makes them internalise this message and see themselves as unable to succeed in school, and thus not suited for high positions in society, further decreasing their self-esteem. Freire refers to this situation when he says that the oppressed hear so often that they are incapable that they begin to believe it and

[11] Culture referring to that valued by the school.

call themselves ignorant (Freire, 1996), as the domesticated parents saw their children to be. Therefore, schooling is used to naturalise inability, which is actually a result of inferior social status (Bourdieu, 1976b) combined with a blame-the-victim attitude (Borg, 1997).

1.4 Conclusion

Therefore, to understand the attributional patterns of parents in this research, one must understand the psychological and sociological aspects involved as well as the link between the internal and external loci of control.

To summarise, social class influences achievement that, in turn, influences one's self-esteem, and again affects achievement, creating a vicious circle. The link between social class and achievement is mediated by the symbolic violence exerted by the dominant class over the dominated classes so as to bring about social reproduction. To mask this social reproduction, credentialling is used to assess the type and quantity of cultural capital possessed by the pupils. If they are children coming from the dominant class, their habitus conforms to that of the school and thus finish off schooling successfully and are rewarded qualifications which can be translated into social positions, and very often, economic capital. On the other hand, those coming from the dominated classes and whose habitus does not correspond to that of the school end up as failures since they do not have the necessary quality and quantity of cultural capital.

This situation is portrayed as being natural, thus legitimising the process of credentialling. This leads to an anti-school culture and a lowering of self-esteem in the case of those who fail, further affecting their achievement. The outcome is that children and parents end up believing that failure is a result of their inability and lack of effort, rather than a result of the power relations in society, as can be seen from the parents' attributions.

This theoretical framework helps us understand whether parents have adopted the blame-the-victim approach in their attributions to failure, making them victims of symbolic violence, or whether they have managed to perceive the power relations involved, thus problemetising the social formation, and the role of the educational system and its effect on the children's self-esteem. Chapters 3 and 4, will show that parents adopted both approaches.

Chapter 2

Research Method

2.1 Introduction

The question regarding how parents explain academic failure of their children, can be answered in two complementary but distinct ways: quantitatively or qualitatively. Although the former would produce interesting results since it would furnish us with a general idea of parental attributions in a large sample of parents, I chose the latter as my research method since it delves deeply into the subject by trying to understand how the participants themselves structure reality.

2.2 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Cohen & Manion, 1994) with the aim of uncovering what lies behind any phenomenon that is being studied (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Qualitative research is concerned with understanding the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she is found (Cohen & Manion).

For this research, rather than looking at how a large number of parents interpret academic failure through predetermined reasons, the aim was to present the

parents' subjective experience making the research belong to the parents rather than to myself.

Of all the different types of qualitative research methods I decided to use Grounded Theory since this approach concentrates on how the *participants* construct reality rather than approaching the participants with set categories. Thus, participants would be able to present their own narrative of academic failure.

2.3 Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory is a qualitative research method developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. It uses a systematic set of procedures to analyse data about a phenomenon – the central idea or happening – and develops a theory which is grounded in that data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Using this method, one can move from the particular – the actual data – to the general – a formal theoretical question (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). This is done by looking at a particular phenomenon, selecting the sample and gathering the data. After this, each part of the data is analysed and divided into different categories, after which the researcher focuses on the relationships between the categories, deriving a theoretical framework about the phenomenon.

To keep the procedure as consistent as possible, the book by Corbin and Strauss (1990) was used as a guideline. Let me know describe the methodology suggested by these authors.

2.3.1 Sampling

Sampling is the selection of participants in a study. Selection can either be random or selective, depending on the purpose of the study. Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggest that sampling should be done throughout the study and that the type of sampling done (the degree of selectivity) should depend on the stage one has achieved in the study.

The first sampling to be performed is *open sampling* where openness rather than specificity is sought about the phenomenon. When linking of data is being carried out, *relational* (or *variational*) *sampling* should be used. The aim at this stage is to maximise the finding of differences. At the last stage, a very selective type of sampling called *discriminate sampling* should be used to maximise the opportunities to verify the story line that has been created. Thus, the researcher should try to find out participants who, as much as possible, deviate from the linkages that have been made among the data. After performing open sampling, and gathering the data, coding of the data is performed. Relational and discriminate sampling occur simultaneously with the whole process of coding rather than as distinct stages.

2.3.2 Data Gathering

Corbin and Strauss (1990) do not describe how data is to be gathered so guidelines for the methodology involved were searched for elsewhere. The two main ways to collect data for qualitative research are ethnography and interviewing. In my case, I used interviewing as my only data collection method since I performed no ethnography.

An interview can be described as a "transaction that takes place between seeking information on the part of one and supplying information on the part of the other", the aim of which is to "bring out the affective and value laden implication of the subject's responses" (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Cohen & Manion suggest that interviews may range from the *structured* type – where the content and procedures are determined in advance in the form of a schedule – to the *unstructured* type – an open interview where there is no fixed schedule as to how the interview should proceed.

Interviews can also range from being non-directive to being focused. In the *non-directive interview* there is almost no control shown by the researcher and the flow of the interview is left in the hands of the participant, while in the *focused interview*, the researcher keeps the interview focused on the subject concerned thus maintaining constant control of the flow of the interview.

To avoid structured interviews which can be superficial, force responses and irritate the participants (Cohen & Manion, 1994) while at the same time retaining some form of structure, I used interviews that are loosely structured, called *semi-structured interviews* (Powney & Watts, 1987). This enabled the comparison of data across subjects (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) while allowing a degree of flexibility. To facilitate this comparison, focused interviews were used, deviation being allowed only to make the participant feel more at ease during the interview.

Although semi-structured interviews are very good tools for qualitative research because they are flexible, enable probing of the participant and encourage the participant to co-operate (Cohen & Manion, 1994), they also have their limitations. First of all it is easier for participants to deviate and to try to control the interview. Moreover the participants may decide not to give factual information or they may misunderstand the question. Apart from this, the researcher's bias is a very determining factor in the asking of questions.

Data can be gathered in the form of video-tape recordings, audio-tape recordings, or field notes. Participants would be most self-conscious if video recording is used and least self-conscious if field notes are used. On the other hand, field notes capture only a small proportion of the actual situation, something so essential for qualitative research, apart from requiring a lot of speed by the researcher (Powney & Watts, 1987) and an occasional pause by the participants for the researcher to manage to write down what is being said. Also, in determining what to write down and what not to write down, the researcher goes through a process of selection that may be influenced very strongly by his or her bias. The researcher may also overlook important details. Contrary to field notes, video-taping captures not only *what* is being said but also *how* it is being said, giving a more holistic approach to the interview session without passing it through the selective mechanism of the researcher. To counterbalance the advantages and disadvantages of these two methods, audio-taping was used since it allows quite an accurate collection of data, both because it records the actual words said by the participants and because it makes the participants less self-conscious of the presence of the recording device since it is a lesser threat to confidentiality than video-taping is.

2.3.3 Coding

The data collected is divided into different categories. This process is called coding. The first type of coding that is performed (after the first data is gathered) is *open coding* where one breaks down, examines, and compares the data. This is then categorised and the categories are then developed in terms of their properties and dimensions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), thus moving away from the descriptive towards the analytic mode.

The second stage of coding which also takes place during open coding is called *axial coding*. Here the researcher assembles the data in new ways, trying to bring out the context of the phenomenon, the conditions required, and the consequences. Thus the categories are now united together in a causal pattern. Statements made through new linkages between categories are then verified against the actual data. At this stage, to make statements as foolproof as possible, relational sampling is used.

The final stage is called *selective coding* where a story is written to describe the phenomenon. A core-category – the central phenomenon – is chosen and the story is written in such a way as to relate all the other categories to it. Again the story is validated against the data by using discriminate sampling if necessary, and the final data is organised in such a way as to move from conditions, to the phenomenon, to consequences.

2.3.4 Deriving the Theory

The different categories and the relationships formed among them during selective coding form the basis for the derivation of the theory. At this stage, the linkages formed among the data are elaborated into a theory that encompasses all the data, turning the particular (the data collected) to a universal theory. This means that the theory can be applied in different situations provided the conditions are similar to those of this research.

The first step is to integrate the linkages into a conditional matrix which ensures that the categories that are used in the theory are only those categories which are conditions or causes, or consequences of the phenomenon, either directly or indirectly. This process excludes all irrelevant data.

The second step involves the presentation of these relationships as a logic diagram which illustrates how the categories are related together. This includes distinguishing between influential and causal linkages, and between direct and indirect relationships.

The final stage is the formulation of the theory which is derived by looking at the logic diagram and writing up a theory that moves away from the logic diagram as a representation of the data gathered, to one which represents all similar situations. However, the theory formulated must be drawn from, and must agree with, the data. Such a theoretical framework can also include relevant literature so as to make the theory universal.

2.3.5 Strengths and Limitations of Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory's strengths lie firstly in that it steers thinking out of the confines of literature and focuses on the actual data, thus integrating the two and not taking the latter for granted. It helps the researcher avoid standard ways of thinking about phenomena, stimulating inductive rather than descriptive processes. It helps the researcher listen to what the participants, not the literature or the researcher's mind, are saying and meaning, allowing clarification of assumptions. Grounded Theory forces the asking of questions and also allows exploration of possible meanings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

On the other hand, the volume of data collected is so large that only a portion, relevant to the phenomenon, is used, leaving a considerable amount of unused, although interesting, data. Incorrect information provided by the participants is one main limitation since the theory derived is rooted in the data gathered, even if it is not factual. Finally, the process of categorising, re-categorising and linking data in new ways is susceptible to the researcher's bias and categories.

2.4 The Sample

In this research, the original idea was to obtain the examination results of all Year five and Year six pupils of one particular school since when they were in Year four. The sample would then have consisted in ten of the lowest achieving boys and ten of the lowest achieving girls from both year groups. However, since the school refused to provide the examination results, my alternative option was to contact the parents directly, which I managed to do with the help of the Church organisation "St. Peter Institute" in the town of Ħal-Minsi. As St. Peter Institute helps children with learning difficulties and who fail at school, the sampling of the students was quite reliable since members of the Institute not only knew how the child performed at school but also how the child performed when helped by the members of the Institute. Moreover, St. Peter Institute is also in contact with the parents, facilitating the link with the parents and contributing to more reliable data since the parents trust people who are sent by the Institute.

2.4.1 Ħal-Minsi

Ħal-Minsi is a large town which is further subdivided into different areas. Two of these areas are relatively depressed areas where most of the people belong to the working class. The number of social and family problems is also very high in the area, these including poverty and unemployment. Unpublished research (not cited for ethical reasons) performed by St. Peter Institute also shows a very high level of illiteracy.

In Area 1, the government had built a number of apartment blocks, each made up of about 25 flats, and a number of terraced houses. The flats usually shelter the poorest people in the area while those living in the houses are usually more affluent. Area 2 is made up of different types of housing, some of which are poor while others are much better, depending on the financial situation of the family. Seven of the participants lived in Area 1, four of them in the flats, while the rest lived in Area 2 (see figure 4).

Interview	Area 1 *flats*	Area 1 *houses*	Area 2
1	X		
2			X
3			X
4		X	
5	X		
6		X	
7			X
8	X		
9			X
10	X		
11		X	
12			X
13			X

Figure 4
House location for each household interviewed.

2.4.2 The Children

In all cases children came from and lived at Hal-Minsi and had attended at least either Hal-Minsi Primary A or B. Also, all the children referred to[12] were either doing badly and experiencing difficulties at school, or they had done badly and experienced difficulties at school before. Although I had intended to keep the age variable constant, due to the change in plan mentioned before, the ages ranged from 6 to 17 years (Year 2 to Form 5). The number of children in each family and the scholastic year they had finished before the research was conducted can be seen in figure 5. The same data, grouped according to the school level achieved, is represented in tabular form in figure 6.

[12] "children referred to" refers to those children who are relevant for this research, i.e., those who experience or experienced academic failure.

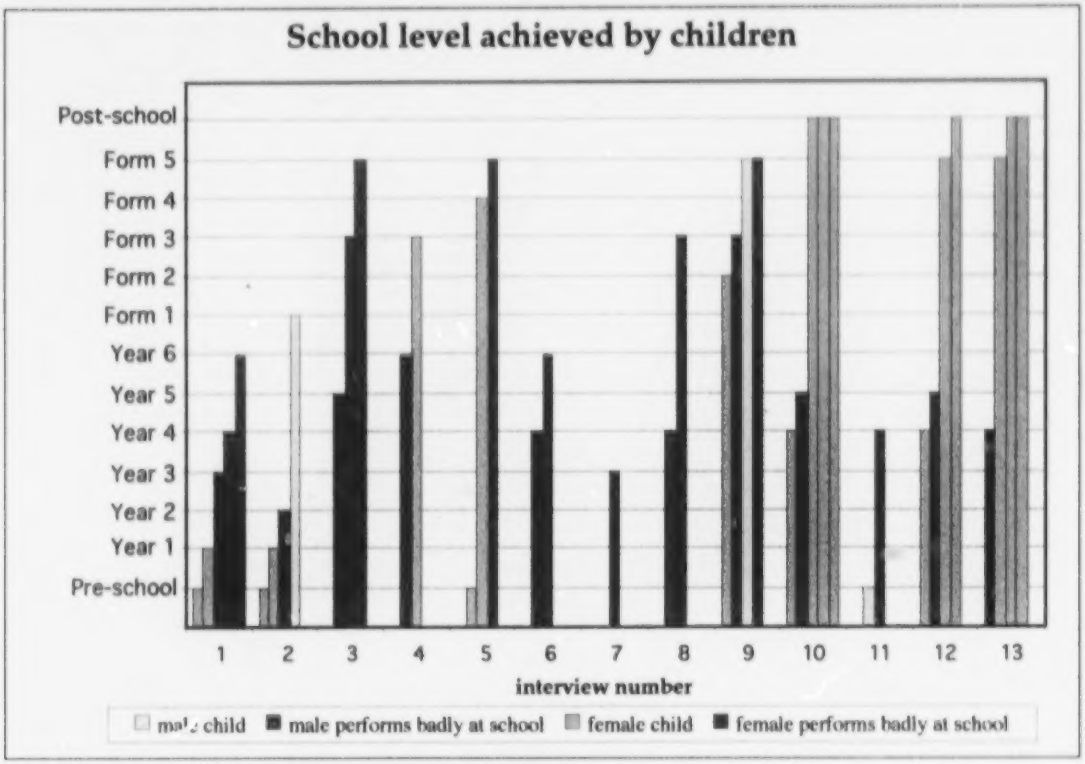


Figure 5
Number of children in each family interviewed showing each child's level of schooling.

Number of children	Males	Females	Total
before primary schooling	1	3	4
in primary school	9	9	18
in secondary school	7	6	13
after secondary schooling	1	5	6

Figure 6
Number of boys and girls in families interviewed grouped by schooling level.

Focusing only on the children referred to during the interviews, the number and gender of children at each schooling level can be seen in figure 7.

Schooling level	Males	Females	Total
Year 1	0	0	0
Year 2	1	0	1
Year 3	1	1	2
Year 4	2	3	5
Year 5	3	0	3
Year 6	2	1	3
Form 1	0	0	0
Form 2	0	0	0
Form 3	2	1	3
Form 4	0	0	0
Form 5	3	0	3
TOTAL	*14*	*6*	*20*

Figure 7
Number and gender of children who underachieved at school.

Figure 8 shows the schools attended by all the children. *Hal-Minsi Primary A* and *B*, and *Ħal-Żgħir* are both government primary schools. *G. H. Inglott* is a Church primary school while *D. E. Farrugia* is an independent private school. *Ħal-Kbir* is a boys' secondary school. *Ħal-Qasir* is a girls' secondary school. *J. K. Licari* is a Church secondary school while *Junior Lyceum* is an unspecified Junior Lyceum. *Ħal-Twil* and *B. C. Demajo* are both trade schools. The latter has been closed down.

interview number	Children's name	Schools											
		Primary Schools					Secondary Schools				Trade		
		D. E. Farrugia	G. H. Inglott	Hal-Minsi A	Hal-Minsi B	Hal-Żghir	Hal-Kbir	Hal-Qasir	J. K. Licari	Junior Lyceum	B. C. Demajo	Hal-Twil	University
1	Rennie			X	X								
1	Victor			X	X								
1	George			X									
1	Charmaine			X									
1	Alessia												
2	Roderick			X	X		X						
2	Matthew			X									
2	Lucia			X									
2	Nadesh												
3	Glenn			X	X							X	
3	Steve			X	X		X						
3	Kurt			X	X								
4	Kristy			X	X								
4	Jonathan			X	X			X					
5	Sean			X	X						X	X	
5	Talisia			X	X			X					
5	Bernice												
6	Diane	X		X	X								
6	Annalise	X		X	X								
7	Trisa			X		X							
8	Dorianne			X	X			X					
8	Rowen			X	X								
9	Thomas		X	X	X		X						
9	Wayne		X							X			
9	Justin		X	X	X		X						
9	Jessica		X						X				
10	Sandra			X	X			X					
10	Roxanne			X	X			X					
10	Daniel			X	X		X						
10	Judith			X	X			X					
10	Christian			X	X								
11	Kimberley			X	X								
11	Ryan												
12	MaryLynn			X	X			X					X
12	Abigail			X	X			X					
12	Kyle			X	X								
12	Martina			X	X								
13	Justine			X	X			X					
13	Mariella			X	X			X					
13	Emilie			X	X			X					
13	Ann			X	X								

Figure 8
Schools attended by all the children of the parents interviewed.

2.4.3 The Parents

The participants were chosen with the help of St. Peter Institute. Preferably both parents were to be present at the interview. However, in interviews 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11, only the mother was available. In the case of interview 10, the father had died a number of years before.

The parents' ages ranged from over 30 years to over 50 years. Almost half of them were in the 40 – 50 age bracket.

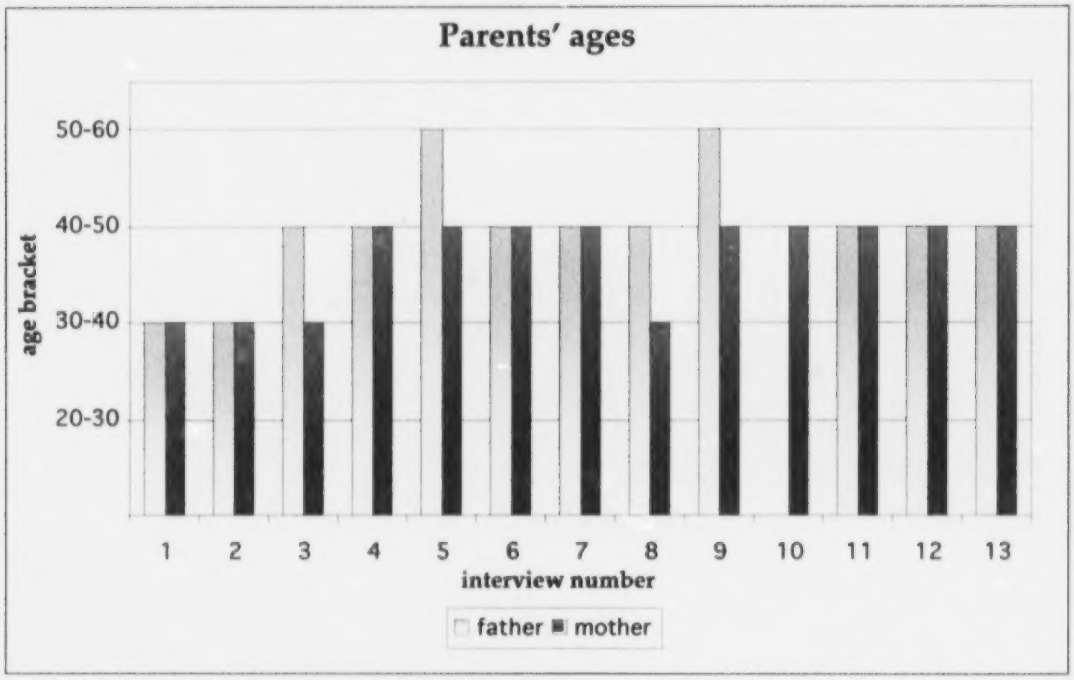
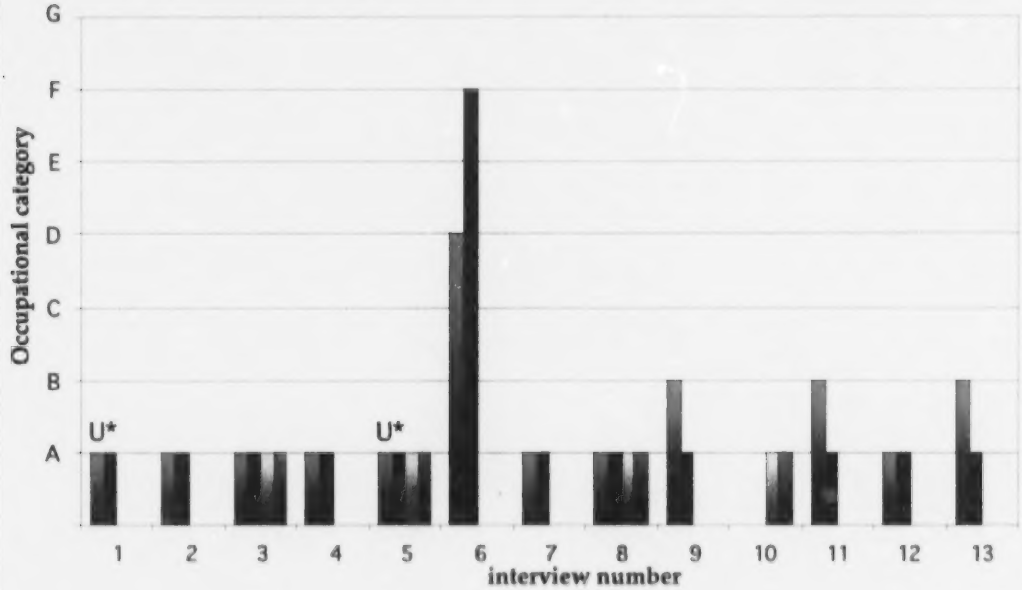


Figure 9

According to the broad occupational categories used in the census of 1995 (Central Office of Statistics, 1997), the occupation of eleven of the fathers fell in the *production and related workers, transport, equipment operation workers* category. This group includes builders, white-washers, drydock/shipbuilding workers, metal/aluminium workers, factory workers, porters, technicians, plumbers and electricians. The occupation of eight of these fathers would have fitted into the *unskilled* category of the 1985 census (Central Office of Statistics, 1986) while the other three would have fitted into the *skilled/semi-skilled* category. The other father's occupation fell in the *administrative and managerial* category (Central Office

of Statistics, 1986, 1997). As regards the mothers, only four of them worked outside the house and all of these worked as maids, therefore being in the *production and related workers, transport, equipment operation workers* category of the 1995 census and in the *unskilled* category of the 1985 census.



1985 census occupational categories	
A	unskilled
B	skilled & semi-skilled
C	executive & clerical
D	administrative & managerial
E	professional & technical

U* = *unemployed at time of interview*

1995 census occupational categories	
A	production & related, transport, equipment operation
B	agricultural, animal husbandry, forestry, fishermen
C	service
D	sales
E	clerical & related
F	administrative & managerial
G	professional, technical & related

Figure 10
Occupational categories according to the 1985 and 1995 censuses for mother and father, together with a description of each category as provided by the census. (information taken from: Central Office of Statistics, 1986, 1997)

Socio-economic status varied among different families. Economic capital ranged from families having severe financial problems to affluent families. It was calculated on the parents' state of employment, the state of their house and furniture, and the possession of luxury items such as air-conditioners.

Cultural capital was calculated in terms of educational capital, including the literacy level of the parents, the number of years of schooling undergone by the parents, their level of English, and whether they took their children out for cultural visits. Since the specific measurement of cultural and economic capital was not one of the aims of the research, the amount of capital attributed to the families is quite subjective as it is derived from what I observed and from what the parents said. As one can see from figure 11, both kinds of capital varied quite a lot among different families. Figure 12 explains the criteria used to classify families into different levels of cultural and economic capital levels. For a family to be classified at a certain level, it needed to have at least one of the characteristics of that level.

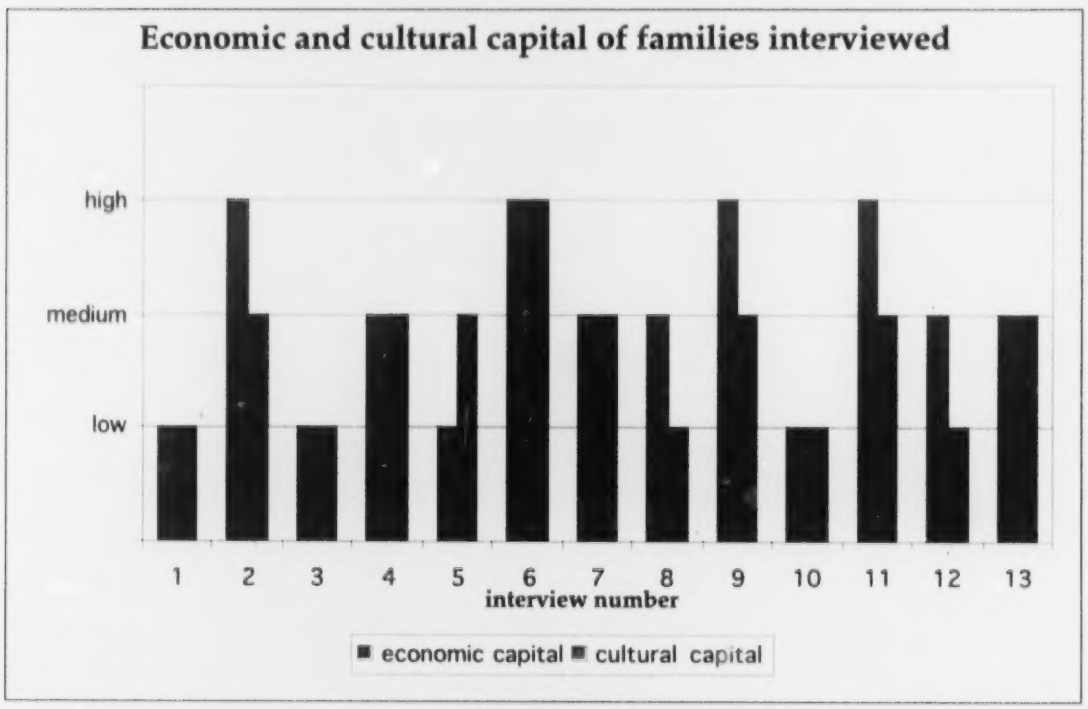


Figure 11
Economic and cultural capital possessed by families interviewed, based on figure 12.

Economic capital

low	*medium*	*high*
• not enough money to buy food • not enough money to keep a telephone • unemployed • house is barely furnished • make-shift type of furniture (e.g. broken chairs/tables)	• furniture not of a very good quality but neat (usually fitted) • tidy, clean, well-ordered house or flat • father earns enough money to have a decent standard of living	• good quality furniture • air-conditioner • large terraced house • father earns a relatively good amount of money owing to status or overtime, thus affording a high standard of living

Cultural capital

low	*medium*	*high*
• illiterate or almost illiterate • complete or almost complete lack of knowledge of English	• literate (mostly for functional purposes) • basic English and Maths	• have some form of post-secondary education • highly literate in both English and Maltese • take children for cultural outings • read a lot of different material

Figure 12
Characteristics of different levels of economic and cultural capital.

The parents' school level also varied between participants. Figure 13 illustrates the amount of schooling undergone by different parents.

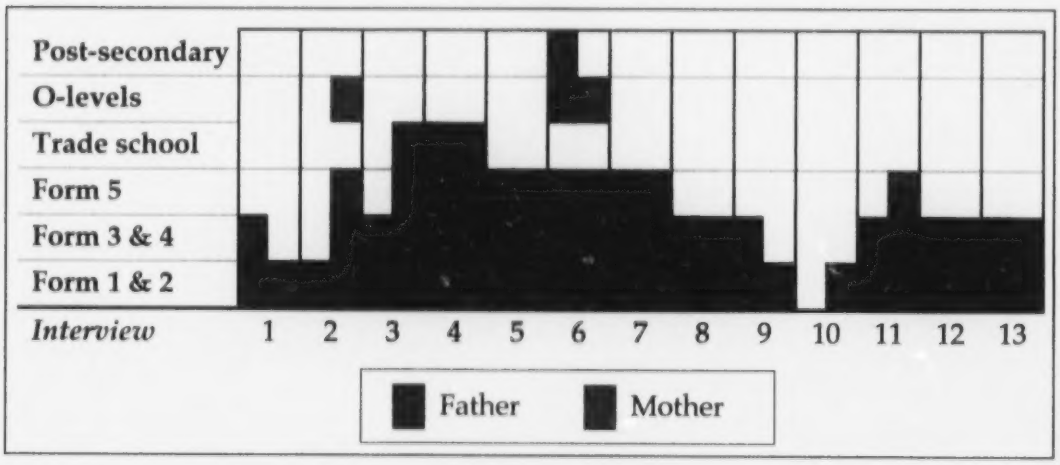
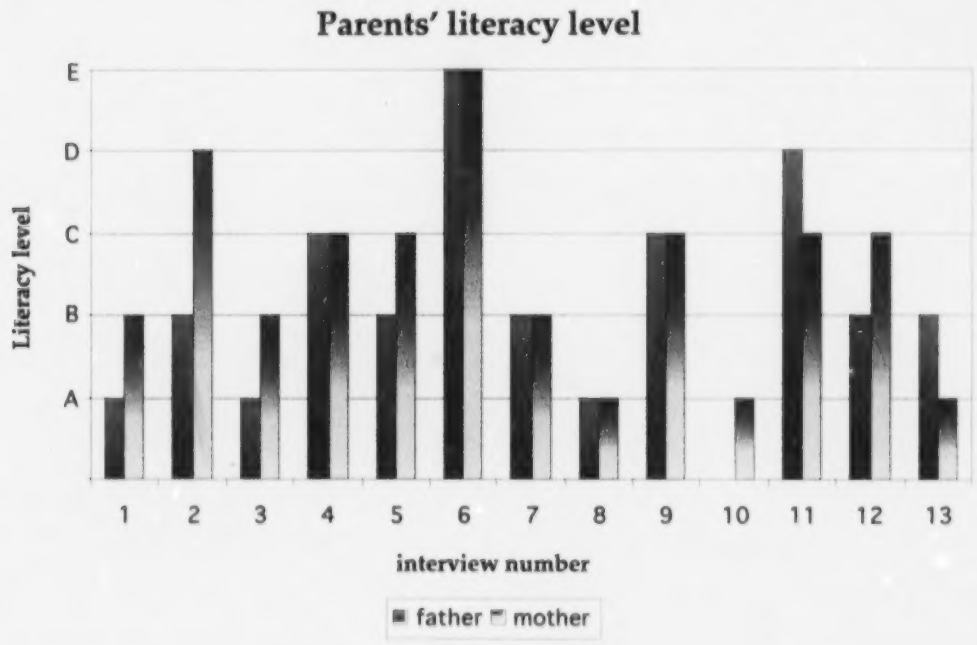


Figure 13
Amount of schooling undergone by parents.

Related to this is the parents' literacy level in Maltese and English. Figure 14 illustrates the differences between the parents interviewed. The table beneath explains each category shown in the graph. This information was again obtained from what the parents said about their level of literacy. However it is useful to keep such information in mind when analysing the data.



Literacy level	Description
A	• illiterate, i.e., no knowledge of reading or writing
B	• basic literacy in Maltese
C	• literate in Maltese, basic literacy in English
D	• literate in Maltese and English (up to secondary level of schooling)
E	• highly literate in both languages (post-secondary schooling)

Figure 14
Parents' level of literacy with description of criteria used to assign parents to different categories.

2.5 Data Gathering

The data gathering process involved gaining access to the participants, performing the pilot study, holding the interviews and then transcribing them.

2.5.1 Access to Participants

Access, as mentioned before, was possible through St. Peter Institute. To gain access to each household, the director of St. Peter Institute arranged an introductory meeting with the parents. He came with me for the meeting, which took place at the parents' home, and introduced me to the parents. Having the interview at home was an added advantage for two reasons. First, it helped make the participants feel more at ease. Secondly it allowed me to observe their home environment providing me with information about their economic and cultural capital. After being introduced I proceeded to inform them of the aim of the research, presenting it to them as a search for the reasons why they think that their children were not doing well at school and whether they were encountering any problems at school. Confidentiality and anonymity was guaranteed and permission for the use of the tape-recorder was asked for. The intended length of the interview was also made clear so that the parents would know what was expected of them even with regards to the time involved. After this, the parents were asked whether they still wanted to take part in the research after which we agreed on a date for the interview. All participants accepted to being interviewed.

2.5.2 Pilot Study and Interview Questions

The first interview of the pilot study was transcribed and analysed to see whether the necessary information could be drawn from it. Only minor changes needed to be made and so the pilot study was stopped and the interviews begun. The final, basic set of interview questions and their sequence is shown below:

- Information about the parents (participants).
- How is the child performing at school?
- What is the relationship between the child and the teachers, headteacher, and peers?
- Why is the child not doing well at school?
- What is the relationship between the parents (the participants) and the teacher and headteacher?

- Does the school organise activities for parents? If yes, do the parents (participants) attend?

Although these were the intended questions, the actual content and sequence, as well as the addition of other questions was ultimately determined by the way interviews proceeded.

2.5.3 The Interviews and Transcriptions

When going for the interviews, a number of things had to be kept in mind. Firstly, the aim of the interviewer is not to evaluate the participants' attitudes but to learn their point of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Secondly, for ethical reasons, attention was given to anonymity and confidentiality. Approval for the use of the tape-recorder was again sought before the actual interview. Once again, all the participants agreed.

As suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) and Powney and Watts (1987), during the interview care was given to show attention to what the participants were saying through nodding, eye-contact, and questioning for clarification. Yes-no answers were avoided as much as possible, and periods of silence were allowed. Long, cumbersome questions and change of subject or advice-giving were usually avoided.

The interviews were then transcribed. Although Bogdan and Biklen (1982) suggest the removal of unnecessary conversation, it was only in two interviews (interviews 1 & 11) that this was done since not all 'unnecessary' conversation is necessarily irrelevant. Where data was excluded, a note was inserted stating the content of the missing data. Other parts of the data were also deleted – or transcribed as unrecognisable – since the recording was not always clear. Whenever such deletions were made, either question marks were inserted or the transcript was modified slightly so as to keep the flow of the interview as smooth as possible. When transcribing actions and noises, the transcription codes of Bentley and Watts (cited in Powney and Watts, 1987) were used mostly. However, some ideas from Coxon's coding (cited in Powney and Watts), as well as others I myself invented were also used.

2.5.4 Time Involved

Although I had agreed on one hour with the parents, the actual time taken for the interview varied between half an hour and two hours. A further amount of time was needed for the introductory session, ranging from just a few minutes to half an hour. In all the interviews and the introductory meetings took me around 25 hours. Transcription took me over 100 hours.

2.5.5 Errors in Interview Methodology

This being my first interview practice, I was very much conscious of the tape-recorder in my first three interviews. This self-consciousness however decreased with time. On analysing my first interviews, I found that sometimes I had digressed a bit from the subject or that I let the parents digress from the subject a bit too much – something very difficult to control.

Moreover sometimes I did not ask the question clearly or I did not probe enough for an answer. There was another time when I answered a question myself and when I commented on what was being said, something I should not have done since it could have biased the participants' answers. The biggest problem I encountered was controlling the dominant person when both parents were present.

On the parents' side, I found that some of them were very stiff, partly owing to the presence of the tape-recorder, but also partly owing to their character, as in the case of interview 2. The most frustrating interview was interview 13 because at one point the boyfriend of one of the elder girls entered the room and remained there. Moreover, when the child concerned later entered the room, the parents not only did not ask her to leave the room but they started commenting about her achievement in her presence and asking her questions which were bound to show that the child had not learned what she should have learnt at school. As a result of this I switched off the tape-recorder seeing that the situation was unjust for the child.

2.6 Data Analysis

The transcripts were printed and coded using the Grounded Theory procedures mentioned earlier. In the process of open coding, the relevant parts of the printed transcripts were cut up and each part was marked with a category number and placed in different folders (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

When the first process of data coding was finished, axial and selective coding were performed together by re-examining the data within the categories and putting them back together in another sequence in such a way as to ensure that all categories were relevant to the phenomenon of academic failure. The categories were divided into those mentioned in chapter 1: *pupil-related, parent-related, teacher-related* and *other-external.*

After this reassembling of data, the sub-categories were organised in the form of a logic diagram for each interview illustrating in graphical form the causal relationship between the different sub-categories leading to failure as suggested by the parents. The different logic diagrams were then assembled into one, comprehensive logic diagram. Since the research dealt with the causal attributions of the phenomenon of academic failure but not with its consequences, the coding could not be completely faithful to the method suggested in Grounded Theory. Thus the conditional matrix was not used. The theory developed was then written down together with the reporting of data and constitutes chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this study.

2.7 The Researcher

The researcher is one of the most influential factors in the reliability of the interview and the subsequent analysis. According to Powney and Watts (1987) the researcher comes with three types of biases.

The first type is the background bias involving the researcher's age, sex, socio-economic status, race, religion and education. To neutralise this bias, at least in its explicit form, when meeting the participants, I was careful to dress plain, casual clothes. I also removed all jewellery, watches and other badges or labels as suggested by the same authors.

The second type of bias is the psychological bias which affects the researcher's perceptions, attitudes, motives, opinions and expectations. These may lead the researcher to seek for the answers he or she wants and to misperceive what the participants are actually saying (Cohen & Manion, 1994). This was why tape-recording of the interviews was used.

The third type of bias is behavioural bias which consists of inappropriate behaviour during the interview. Such behaviour includes the use of restricted or elaborate language codes (Bernstein, 1977) – both verbal and non-verbal – that are used by the researcher which may not match the language code of the participants.

At the same time, one must also remember that the researcher cannot eliminate his or her own subjectivity; he or she can only limit it (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Were the researcher to succeed in eliminating his or her bias, he or she would still indirectly affect the outcome of the interview through what Bogdan and Biklen (p. 43) call the "observer effect", that is, the behavioural change of the participants because of the researcher's presence. This may lead to the participants trying to impress the researcher at the beginning of the interview. To try to avoid this, the interviews were modelled on a conversation built on trust so as to make the data as reliable as possible.

2.8 Ethical Issues

Since the interviews were qualitative in nature, the participants were exposed much more than had the research taken the form of anonymous questionnaires. Thus, special care had to be taken to ensure that the participants were treated with respect, since although "truth is good, respect for human dignity is better" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 359).

2.8.1 Informed Consent

The first basic consideration in ethical issues is that, living in a democracy, participants should give *informed* consent. Cohen and Manion (1994) suggest four factors that ensure the participants' respect. Firstly, they should be mature enough

to decide whether or not to enter and continue in the research as was the case in this study. Secondly, it should be clear that the involvement of the participants is voluntary, as was expressed in the introductory meeting with the parents. Thirdly, the participants should be fully informed about the research procedures, including any risks involved. Finally, the participants should comprehend clearly the aims of the research. In such a way one will be maintaining the participants' self esteem (Powney & Watts, 1987). The last two procedures were performed both in the introductory meeting and before the interview.

2.8.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

To protect the participants from abuse, anonymity and confidentiality is essential. By anonymity one means that none of those who read the research can in any way trace the names of the participants or the location where the research was held. This was done by changing all the names of the participants as well as all the names mentioned by them. All names of places, schools and institutions were also changed into fictitious names. To ensure confidentiality, only the important data was described clearly. Other data, such as the age of the parents, was presented as data groupings.

2.8.3 Thanking the Participants

As a sign of respect and gratitude, Cohen and Manion (1994) suggest thanking the participants by sending them thank-you letters. Since not all participants were literate and since I knew that the participants appreciate face to face communication more than written correspondence, the participants were thanked verbally in an explicit way after the interview.

2.8.4 Reporting

Finally, the data was reported in as honest a way as possible to avoid deception. Otherwise it would have been unjust towards the reader, the research community and especially towards the participants.

Chapter 3

Internal Attributions

3.1 Introduction

Pupil-related, internal attributions made by the parents in the interviews may be divided into two major categories: *pupil-related actions*, and *internal characteristics*. Attributions for failure under *pupil-related actions* were truancy and children's handwriting. When attributing failure to internal characteristics parents mentioned motivation, ability (either as low cognitive ability or some kind of disability), children's character, and children's self-esteem. The categorisation is summarised in figure 15.

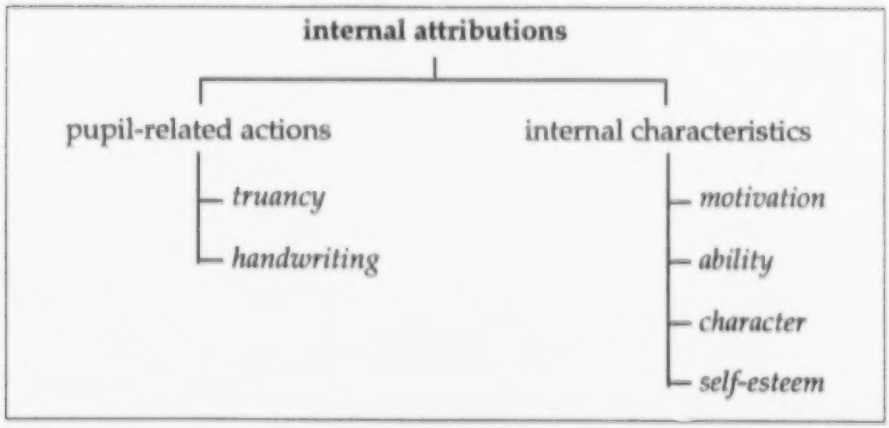


Figure 15
Categorisation of parents' internal attributions for failure.

3.2 Pupil-Related Actions

The two main parental attributions in this category are truancy and children's handwriting. If a child had an untidy handwriting it was seen as being conducive to failure (interview 1).

Truancy was mentioned in interview 5. Although it was said to bring about failure, truancy was a result of two external factors: lack of care of certain teachers, and lack of discipline at school – in this case a trade-school. Thus, although truancy is an internal factor leading to underachievement, it is the result of external factors.

3.3 Internal Characteristics

These factors are given more prominence than *pupil-related actions* as they are mentioned in different interviews and emphasised much more than those of the latter category.

3.3.1 Motivation

According to the parents, lack of motivation can be seen in lack of enthusiasm, demotivation, unwillingness to learn and school dislike. Lack of enthusiasm is seen as being either inherent to the child (interviews 2 & 11) in comments such as "M'ghandhiex dik il-qisu ħegġa, ħa nitkellmu kif inhi, fiha nnifisha," *["She doesn't have that type of enthusiasm, let's be honest, within her"]* (interview 11) thus blaming the victim, or as being caused by the educational system since it does not organise schooling in such a way as to motivate those who are unenthusiastic about school (interview 3). In the former case, one sees the result of the symbolic violence exerted on these parents since they view failure as coming from a *deficiency* in motivation from the child's part and therefore these are domesticated parents.

Those who have some form of enthusiasm may become demotivated owing to the experience of failure and lack of rewards, especially as a result of the comparisons teachers make between pupils (interview 8) and of the streaming process (interview 6). Therefore streaming, when combined with the meritocratic ideology, is a means of exerting symbolic violence by demotivating those who do

not have the dominant cultural capital which is awarded with qualifications since they are seen as incapable when compared to others who succeed.

When speaking about lack of enthusiasm inherent to the child, parents used the phrase "għandu moħħu tajjeb imma ma jridx jużah" *["he does have brains but he doesn't want to use them"]* (interview 8), showing that this lack of enthusiasm is due to unwillingness from the children's part, another case of the blame-the-victim approach. This unwillingness to learn is also explained as being a result of fear of exams and failure (interview 12) as in the case of children suffering from low self-esteem.

Some parents explained their children's lack of motivation as school dislike. The reasons given for this were negative experiences, mostly physical and psychological abuse, that the child had experienced or was experiencing at school. Such experiences include bullying which Banks (1997) says is a direct cause of failure. Children also disliked school because they were made to go through "ceremonies of humiliation" (Holt, 1982, p. 286) by teachers. These include name calling and frequent handing out of copies (interview 1), both leading to loss of self-esteem, as one parent said when referring to name calling: "Imma tkun żgħir differenti. Iddaħħallu mentalità 'l dak li jkun li jgħidlek, 'Jien!' u jibda jiskarta l-iskola" *["But when you're still young it's different. One instils in him such an idea that he says 'I!' and he starts playing truant"]* (interview 1). According to the parents school dislike leads children to prefer trade schools rather than academic schooling (interview 5). It also results in anger at the school system (interview 3), and in the children trying to avoid going to school (interview 8).

Thus lack of motivation can either be a result of the child being unwilling or unable to be motivated, as is recognised by domesticated parents, or it can be a result of other external factors, mainly the educational system, teachers and peers. In either case the result is underachievement.

3.3.2 Ability

Parents also mentioned lack of ability or the presence of a disability as an internal characteristic leading to failure. These domesticated parents expressed their children's lack of ability with phrases such as: "ma jasalx sa ċertu ammont" *["he can't reach up to a certain level"]* (interview 3); "qiegħda batuta ħafna u infatti, hopeless, ħafna hopeless" *["she does very badly and in fact she is hopeless, very hopeless"]* (interview 11); and "moħħu ma jżommx" *["he is not able to remember"]* (interview 12). These parents (including those of interview 8) hold an entity theory of intelligence (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 24) where intelligence is seen as fixed and not easily changed. They attribute the child's failure to his or her lack of ability. Some parents naturalised this situation by saying that "il-bniedem mhux l-istess. Hawn min qiegħed moħħu tajjeb għall-istudju ... hawn min qiegħed moħħu tajjeb f'ħaġa oħra." *["Not all people are the same. There are some whose brains are good for studying ... there are some whose brains are good for other things."]* This confirms their entity view of intelligence. This view of intelligence is however a result of the dominant ideology they have internalised, perceiving achievement as dependent on ability rather than on the system.

The parents in interview 12 attributed low ability of their child to a trauma the mother had gone through when she was pregnant with the child, an experience that, as the doctors said, could have had an effect on the child's cognitive ability. Thus, once again, one observes that some internal factors are attributed to external factors.

The disability issue was raised by the parents of interviews 1 and 7 where the children suffered from a disability: epilepsy and autism respectively. In both cases, the parents said that the children were failing at school because obstacles were created for them by the educational system, either by not providing the required assistance or, as in interview 7, by not accepting the child in a number of schools because of her disability. Moreover, both cases expressed their disappointment that their children were made to waste a lot of time outside class because of misbehaviour which is a result of their disability. As will be seen later, these are methods of control exerted by the pedagogic transmitters to enable the dominant class to appropriate the cultural capital offered by the schools thus aiding in the naturalisation and, therefore, reproduction of the system.

3.3.3 Character

Another attribution made by the parents for failure concerned the child's character. Children were described as being careless (interview 2), impatient (interview 4), lacking concentration (interviews 4 & 6), unpredictable at school work, and lacking interest when the task becomes a routine (interview 6). All these characteristics were seen to bear on the child's academic achievement and on his or her motivation. Thus once again one observes the blame-the-victim approach, a result of the dominant ideology, where failure is partly attributed to the child due to his or her character rather than to the system.

3.3.4 Self-esteem

Self-esteem, as mentioned in chapter 1, is a highly determining factor in a child's motivation at school since it affects achievement which in turn affects self-esteem. When failure is seen to be a result of interior factors, the result is a higher negative affective response (Said, 1994) which brings about the lowering of a child's self-esteem, a condition from which most of the children of the participants suffered.

Again one finds that although self-esteem is an internal attribution, it is affected by external factors, one major agent being the teachers. One third of the participants recounted occasions of teachers hitting children in class, sometimes with a ruler, and throwing copybooks at pupils' faces. Such actions were often attributed to a depression the teacher was going through or to the fact that the teacher was old and nervous. Several occasions were mentioned of teachers or headteachers publicly calling names at the children or insulting them. Insults mentioned by the parents in the interviews were: "ġidra" *["turnip"]*, "baħnan" *["simpleton"]*, "m'inti kapaċi għal xejn" *["you're no good"]* (interview 1), "kaboċċa" *["cabbage"]* (interview 4), "iblaħ" *["dumb"]* (interview 5), "slow-coach" (interview 6), "imbeċilli" *["imbecile"]* (interview 10), "ħmar" *["donkey"]* (interviews 1, 4, 5 & 8), "injorant" *["ignorant"]* (interviews 1, 4 & 10), and "ma taf xejn" *["stupid"]* (interviews 5 & 10). The effect of name-calling on children can be seen in interview 4 where the parents said that sometimes they heard the child repeating such insults to himself, and in interview 8 where the mother referred to the effect of name-calling as "iġibu down imbagħad hu[x]!" *["it discourages him"]*.

Apart from this, teachers also draw comparisons among the children with comments such as "dawk aħjar minnek" *["they're better than you are"]* (interview 8). This happened even in the case of siblings, such as in interview 6 where the children attended an independent private school, and where the older child was encouraged to leave the school with comments such as "inti mhux għal hawn" *["you're not fit to be here"]*, and, "qed jaħlu l-flus fuqek." *["they're wasting their money on you."]*

Name-calling, coupled with a complete lack of encouragement by teachers (interview 9) and frequent handing out of copies (interview 1), led children to experience fear and shame which resulted in a lowering of their self-esteem. This fits in with Holt's (1982) idea that children are very much afraid of being called stupid and of being embarrassed. In his book, Holt also mentions that one of the major mistakes teachers made was that they link the child's concept of himself or herself with the work. In this way teachers enable the children to link achievement to self-esteem. This linkage between achievement and self-esteem is further reinforced leading to a highly negative effect on the pupils' self-esteem. This happens because teachers are significant others, and thus their perception of the children greatly influences the latter's self-esteem.

The educational system was seen to be another major cause of a low self-esteem especially through the experience of examinations and subsequent streaming. This experience of failure – especially if the child's classmates ended up in a higher stream or a 'better' school (such as a Junior Lyceum) – and in some cases retention, (Center for Policy Research in Education, 1990; Natale, 1991) resulted in an inferiority complex in the child concerned. The teachers' and the educational system's effect on self-esteem is the way symbolic violence is exerted. As a result the child experiences his or her "inability" affectively. This further aids naturalisation and the reinforcement of the meritocratic ideology in the minds of the child and, subsequently, in the parents' minds.

A third external factor influencing self-esteem is bullying (interview 1) and ridicule by classmates (interview 4). All these factors show that although self-esteem is an internal factor, it is very often the result of other, external factors mainly, teachers, the educational system and bullying.

According to the parents, a low self-esteem results in the child disliking school, becoming demotivated and thus experiencing failure. Also, self-esteem develops within children a great fear of exams which more often than not results in failure, confirming their low self-esteem.

3.4 Conclusion

Therefore, according to the participants, internal attributions for failure can either be *pupil-related actions* such as truancy and an untidy handwriting, or *internal characteristics*. The latter includes motivation, ability, character and self-esteem of the child.

Of great importance is the link the parents make between achievement and self-esteem (as described in section 1.2.1) where underachievement is attributed to low self-esteem. They also mention the lowering of self-esteem due to underachievement and thus the creation of a vicious circle. However, the parents introduce a further two factors in this relationship. The first one is fear, which is a consequence of a low self-esteem and which hinders achievement. The second factor is demotivation which is a result of both a low self-esteem and underachievement. This decreases a child's motivation thus bringing about failure.

Another important attribute mentioned is inherent inability of the child and the child's character. Such parental attributions are a result of their internalisation of the meritocratic ideology imposed on them by the dominant class through the symbolic violence mentioned by Bourdieu (1977b). The internalisation is such that they believe that the reason why their children fail is their ability and character, thus allowing the naturalisation process imposed by orthodoxy. In the future, because these children are not awarded qualifications (due to their different habitus), they will not be able to occupy high positions in society and will form tomorrow's working class.

Interestingly enough, although this chapter deals with internal attributions, most of these are seen to be consequences of external factors, mostly, parent perceptions, teachers, the educational system, and peers (especially through bullying). Thus internal and external factors are linked together by the parents in a causal pattern. It is to these external factors that we now turn.

Chapter 4

External Attributions

4.1 Introduction

Although Bar-Tal and Guttmann (1981) mention three types of external attributions: (a) parent-related, (b) teacher-related, and (c) other-external attributions; I shall be dividing teacher-related attributions into teacher-related when referring to the class teacher, and into educational system-related when referring to the educational system, the school and the head-teacher. Therefore the four categories into which I divided external attributions are: (a) *other-external* attributions, (b) *parent-related* attributions, (c) *teacher-related* attributions, and (d) *educational system-related* attributions.

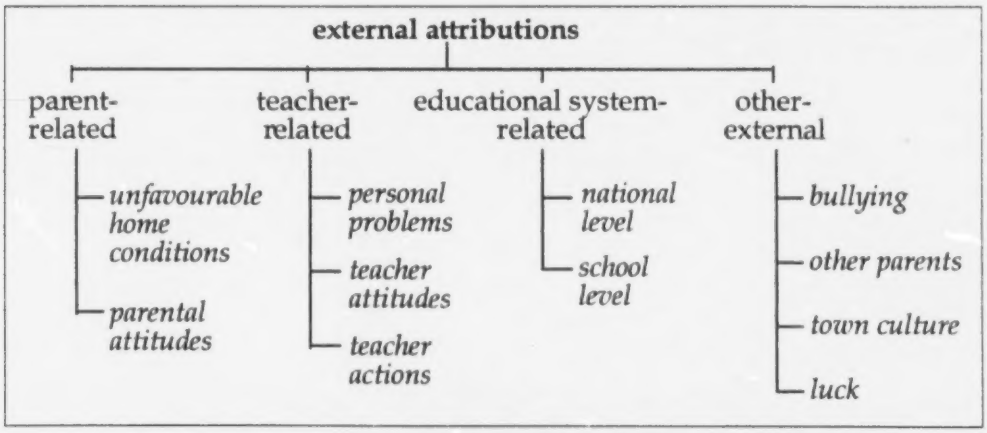


Figure 16
Categorisation of parents' external attributions for failure.

4.2 Other-External Attributions

Parents mentioned four attributions in this category: (a) *bullying*, (b) *other parents*, (c) *town culture*, and (d) *luck*.

4.2.1 Bullying

Borg (1999) found that bullying in Malta is a very serious problem. In his research he found out that frequent bullies and frequent victims are usually found in the lower streams, the streams in which almost all of the children of the participants were found.

Parents suggested two reasons for bullying. One was that of problems at the bully's home, where the bully is the victim of his or her family's bullying. This leads to a situation where the child rebels at school and bullies other pupils (interview 1). Another reason for bullying, brought up in interviews 6 and 12, is lack of teacher control in class. In both cases, bullying is a problem because victims of bullying became afraid of going to school and therefore bullying directly hinders academic achievement resulting in subsequent failure (interview 11), something mentioned also by Banks (1997).

Although an external attribution, bullying affects internal factors, most notably self-esteem, with effects such as "għadu sal-lum jibża' minn dellu!" *["he's still afraid of his own shadow!"]* (interview 1) Thus, bullying causes failure both directly as mentioned above, and indirectly by affecting self-esteem, the consequences of which are shown in section 3.3.4.

4.2.2 Other Parents

Another factor seen as causing failure is the interference of other parents in the child's education by wanting all students to go through the same educational experiences, regardless of a child's special educational needs. This was the case in interview 9 where the son, suffering from hyperactivity, had his educational programme slightly modified. The other children's parents protested that all children should undergo exactly the same educational experiences. The situation became such that the parents had to remove the child from that school, hampering his achievement.

4.2.3 Town Culture

The mother in interview 2 said that one reason for failure at Ħal-Minsi was the town culture which, being predominantly working class, does not emphasise the English language. Since at school almost every subject depends on the use of English, pupils coming from such a background are not prepared for schooling and do not understand everything. Thus they underachieve. This is the only case where reference to social class was made by the parents.

4.2.4 Luck

Although different researches have shown that luck is an important attribution of achievement (Bar-Tal & Guttmann, 1981; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997), in my case, no parent attributed failure *directly* to luck. Luck was seen as having an indirect effect only in two circumstances. The first was the luck involved when teachers are drawn by lot to teach a particular class. In this case luck contributed to failure if an incompetent teacher was chosen for a class (interview 6).

The second circumstance involved sickness – a form of luck – as in the case of interviews 6 and 8. In interview 6 the child had failed in the Year 4 examinations, had ended up in the D stream, and was preparing herself for the annual examinations. According to the parents, she had a very high probability of moving up to the C stream. However, the child got sick during the examination period and was rewarded no marks, remaining in the D stream. "Ħossha qed tagħżaq fl-ilma!" *["She feels that she's beating the air!"]* exclaimed her mother. The second case was interview 8 were the child was sick for a long time during the academic year and sometimes even had to be hospitalised. Obviously he failed in his annual examinations but being in Year 4 this also meant that he would end up in the lower streams (examination results had not been published until the time of the interview). Had the child not been ill, he would surely have done better since he was able to do quite well at school. Therefore, some parents attributed failure of their children to the misfortune of getting sick at a crucial moment.

4.2.5 Conclusion

Other-external attributions that bring about failure are: (a) bullying, which results from home problems and teachers' lack of discipline, and which leads to the lowering of self-esteem and the development of fear of school, and thus subsequent failure; (b) other parents' lack of acceptance of children with special educational needs; (c) a lack of emphasis on English in the town culture; and (d) luck in the choice of teachers and in the onset and durability of sickness.

However, although all four factors are seen as uncontrollable by the parents, such factors are, to a heavy extent, controllable by the educational system. The educational system can monitor bullying and parental interference more strongly and it can change the language and examination policies so as not to discriminate among students coming from different backgrounds. Looking at this from Bourdieu's perspective, one sees the educational system as using these factors to naturalise and legitimise underachievement and therefore subsequent reproduction. Thus, consciously or unconsciously, by exposing these factors, the parents uncovered some of the naturalisation and legitimation processes of the educational system.

4.3 Parent-Related Attributions

When speaking about *parent-related* attributions, one must keep in mind that the term "parents" in this sense means the parents or carers of the children concerned. Other parents fall under the *other-external* attributions category. The *parent-related* category can be sub-divided into: *unfavourable home conditions*, and *parental attitudes* towards their children.

4.3.1 Unfavourable Home Conditions

Bloom (as cited in Alexander, 1997) states that many studies show that home background is the most significant factor in achievement, a view also expressed by the parents participating in Bar-Tal and Guttmann's (1981) study.

Unfavourable home conditions are a problem because they emotionally disturb the child and this leads to failure (Harris, 1961), as the mother in interview 9

remarked: "Il-problemi li hemm id-dar qed iġibhom miegħu" *["He carries with him the problems which are at home"]* (to school). Problems at home, especially if the child is bullied, result in the child developing anger and expressing this at school through misbehaviour (Harris) and rebellion against the school leading to failure. Therefore, unfavourable home conditions lead to underachievement (Jeon & Feldhusen, 1993). The importance of home conditions and of parents as "co-educators" (Macbeth, 1988, p. 319) is also expressed by one parent as: "minn hemm l-edukazzjoni, mid-dar. ... U mbagħad mill-iskola!" *["education begins at home. ... And only then at school!"]* (interview 1)

4.3.2 Parental Attitudes

Parental attitudes affect their children's achievement either through pressure or through lack of encouragement. In interview 13 the father mentioned that some parents pressure their children to achieve goals the parents themselves did not achieve when they were young. This kind of pressure, together with pressure exerted by parents on the child to achieve more so as to satisfy the parents (as in the case of interview 4), is seen to reduce self-esteem and bring about failure.

More serious is the lack of encouragement received by children from their parents. In interviews 4 and 9, parents' encouragement was seen as an important influence on self-esteem. This was also mentioned by McGrath and Repetti (1995) who found a positive correlation between parents' attitudes towards academic performance and the children's perception of their academic competence. Parents in interviews 6 and 9 stressed that parents should encourage their children so as to boost their self-esteem since parents' expectations (but not pressure) influence positively children's academic achievement and are thus "a motivating, low-cost force for guiding adolescents to academic excellence or improvement" (Patrikakou, 1997, p. 22).

4.3.3 Conclusion

Parents are seen to cause failure either through unfavourable home conditions or through their attitudes. Unfavourable home conditions result in failure either because the child is distracted from academic matters or because the child expresses his or her experience of lack of care at home as rebellion against the

school. Parental attitudes result in failure because either through pressuring or by not encouraging their children, or both, the children's self-esteem is lowered, resulting in failure. In both cases, the parents themselves would be acting as agents of symbolic violence by socialising their children into believing that they are not able and therefore believing that they are "deficient" thus internalising the dominant ideology.

4.4 Teacher-Related Attributions

Teacher-related attributions can be divided into three major groups: *personal problems, teacher attitudes,* and *teacher actions. Teacher attitudes* refers to teachers' attitudes towards children while *teacher actions* refers to pedagogical issues, and actions done to pupils and parents.

4.4.1 Personal Problems

The teachers' personal problem mentioned by parents was depression. It is seen as a causal factor of failure because of its effects. Parents in interviews 1 and 4 recounted how teachers suffering from a depression hit pupils. The consequences of such actions are discussed in 4.4.3. Depressed teachers were also reported to sleep in class because they got tired very easily (interviews 3 & 12), and to be unable to control the class. As a result children underachieve.

4.4.2 Teacher Attitudes

Teacher attitudes are particularly important in achievement since for children teachers are significant others. Thus teachers' attitudes and their perception of the pupils influence children a great deal, especially their self-esteem (Katz, 1995). In this study, three prevalent attitudes were seen as causing failure: (a) lack of care, (b) lack of acceptance, and (c) lack of encouragement.

Lack of care

Teachers were accused of being interested only in receiving their wage and of not caring about whether pupils learnt anything. The father in interview 1

described such an attitude as being one of "issa tafu, tafu; jekk ma tafux, ma tafux!" *["if you know it, you know it; if you don't know it, you don't!"]*. Teachers' lack of care for pupils was also mentioned in interview 5. In this case the attitude frustrated pupils so much, especially those who had come from a school where teachers cared about them, that the pupils started absenting themselves from school, ending up as academic failures.

Lack of acceptance

Another teacher attitude that was perceived as a cause of failure is lack of acceptance, especially with regards to disabled children. Pupils suffering from hyperactivity were expected to work in the same way as other "normal" pupils did, as in interview 9. More serious was the case in interview 7 where an autistic child, because of her "misbehaviour", was sent out of class almost every day for five months, and made to face the wall in the headmaster's office. However, rather than blaming the child's misbehaviour, the parent accused the teacher's attitude towards her child, referring to what the teacher had said to the mother at parents' day: "Ħeqq, it-tifla, xi tridni ngħidlek? Mhix sejra tajba għax marida b'moħħha!" *["What am I supposed to tell you about your daughter? She's not doing well because she is mentally ill!"]*

This example is a clear case of inculcation of the dominant ideology by teachers. Although in this case the parent refused the dominant pedagogic action transmitted by the teacher and thus participated in heterodoxy, many other working class parents participate in orthodoxy and accept what the teachers say as being true rather than challenging the teachers' ideas (Lareau, 1989), even though such ideas belong to the dominant ideology.

Lack of encouragement

Since teachers are significant others, their lack of encouragement (part of their pedagogic work as pedagogic transmitters of the dominant pedagogic action) affects children's self-esteem as much as (or as suggested in interview 4, more than) parents' lack of encouragement. In interview 1 the mother stated that if a child is praised at school, he or she will do well; if not, the child will fail.

4.4.3 Teacher Actions

Teacher actions were said to be of three types: (a) those related to teaching, especially methodology and discipline; (b) those related to pupils; and (c) those related to parents, especially as regards collaboration.

Pedagogical issues

Parents criticised the teachers' pedagogy a lot. They complained that some teachers were not "up-to-date" (interview 2), that they were wasting a lot of time on trivial matters rather than actual teaching (interview 12), and that they were not marking the homework correctly (interviews 2 & 4). Parents also reported that teachers did not give children enough notes to study from (interviews 2 & 3), and that a lot of time was wasted in Year 2 repeating what had been done in Year 1 (interview 2). One parent (interview 2) said that teachers should be more "pushy" since otherwise the children will remain academically backward. Thus, parents expect up-to-date, hard-working teachers who have good time-management and who push children to achieve more. Otherwise, teachers would be contributing to failure.

A second problem was the lack of dedication at work of some teachers, as one parent said: "Mhux qed jgħallem biżżejjed it-teacher." *["The teacher is not working as much as he should."]* (interview 3) This situation was reported mostly in the lower streams. Parents reported teachers sleeping in class (interviews 3 & 12) with the repercussion of having children waste time at school. Moreover, a considerable amount of time was allocated to drawing in the F streams (as a means to keep the children occupied with something) and one teacher often bought cheesecakes to keep the pupils under control (interview 3). One parent (interview 4) even argued that uncommitted teachers end up teaching lower streams and that as a result failure for these children is inevitable. Furthermore, pupils in the lower streams were not given notes to study from. This frustration was anxiously expressed by the mother in interview 3: "Fuq xhiex tridu jistudja t-tifel? M'għandu xejn! ... Kif ħa jagħmel l-eżami?" *["With what do you expect my son to study? He hasn't got any notes! ... How is he going to sit for the exam?"]* All this was aggravated when the teacher suffered from a depression as mentioned earlier on. The allocation of such teachers to classes, referred to as "il-giljottina" *["the guillotine"]* (interview 6), is bound to result in the failure of the children in the lower streams.

Another factor remarked as leading to failure is teachers' lack of discipline. This can be a result of either a large pupil to teacher ratio (interview 3) or the teacher's inability to control a class (interview 6). Both cases lead to failure either directly or indirectly through bullying.

Teacher actions related to pupils

What was mentioned most in this category was the maltreatment of children by teachers. The "ceremonies of humiliation" (Holt, 1982, p. 286) undergone by children are numerous and varied.

First of all, five of the participants reported teachers calling names at pupils and insulting them in other ways. The insults are shown in section 3.3.4 when dealing with self-esteem. Insulting children led to demotivation and a loss of self-esteem, both leading to failure: another example of how pedagogic work is carried out.

Pupils were also given a lot of copies which were disproportionate to the offence committed (such as using a dictionary one already possesses rather than buying one like the rest of the class, for financial reasons, interview 1). Three participants also noted that teachers hit pupils, pulled their hair and ears, and threw copybooks at their faces (interview 1, 4 & 12). Such actions were said to lower children's self-esteem and to reinforce their school dislike (interview 1). These two effects are important in the process of inculcation of the dominant ideology since the pupils are made to see themselves as being *naturally* incompatible with the schooling process, so much so that they dislike school.

Parents were also irritated and angered by the fact that those in the lower streams were made to waste a lot of time either by having too much time allotted to drawing (interview 3) or by being sent out of class for most of the time. This also happened with disabled children because of their behaviour. Parents in interview 1 said that their child had spent almost a whole year out in the corridor while the mother in interview 7 reported that her child had spent five months facing the wall in the headmaster's room. The mother in interview 3 had even pleaded with the headmaster to, at least, place her child in a corner in class instead of sending him outside so as to minimise loss of learning. Speaking about children who need special attention, this parent said that "flok jgħinuhom iniżżluhom" *["instead of helping them, they push them further down"]*: something that can be said

about the scholastic experience of the dominate classes of which disabled persons form part. Obviously, owing to this waste of time, pupils will underachieve.

Teacher actions related to parents

Where pupil-teacher relationships are very difficult because of teachers' attitudes, it is very hard to find good parent-teacher relationships. Teachers were described as being antagonistic to parents, ready to retaliate against the parents even at the child's cost (interviews 7 & 11), rather than being ready to "bare the wounds" (Sallis, 1988, p. 287) of their teaching methods. Although parent-teacher relationships were described as being very weak, some parents expressed the need and desire for such links since they "lead to more effective education of children" (David, 1993, p. 181). Such a desire can be seen in the following extract taken from interview 6:

> Bejniethom [parents and teachers] iridu jibnu bridge. Waħda ma tistax tgħid, "Jien m'għandix bżonn l-oħra." Iġifieri minn dal-punt sa dal-punt, it-tnejn iridu jagħtu sehemhom. Ma nistax ngħid jien, "Ħalli t-teacher tagħmel xogħolha!" Iġifieri t-teacher qiegħda hemm tati servizz, imma jien irrid naqdi d-dmirijiet tiegħi ta' omm, ta' ġenituri. Iġifieri ma nistgħux ngħidu, "Ħalliha tagħmel xogħolha! Ma jimpurtaniex!" Ikun hemm komunikazzjoni bejn it-tnejn. Kulħadd irid jagħti l-parti tiegħu.
>
> *[Between them (parents and teachers) they must build a bridge. No one can say, "I don't need the other one." So from this point to this point, both must do their part. I cannot say, "Let the teacher do her job!" The teacher is there providing a service, but I have to do my own duties as a mother, as parents. So we cannot say, "Let her do her job! I don't care!" There must be communication between the two of them. Everybody must do his part.]*

However, one must also note that it was only the parents in interview 6 who expressed such a strong desire for collaboration and that these parents had the highest socio-economic status of all participants. Thus, the parent-teacher relationship pattern can be said to be similar to that observed by Lareau (1989) where linkages between parents and school are higher in the upper-middle class than in the working class. This is because while upper-middle class parents believe that "education is a shared responsibility between teachers and parents" (Lareau, p. 8), working class parents see teachers as "*professionals*, having a specialised body of knowledge that they had acquired through training" (Lareau, p. 111) and that they are not capable of understanding. Therefore they assign responsibility for their children's education to the teacher.

This difference in parental views of involvement is itself a result of social class and of the symbolic violence exerted by the dominant, whereby the working class parents perceive themselves as lacking in the competence, confidence, income, work style, and networks necessary to involve themselves in connections between the family and the educational institutions (Lareau, 1989). Furthermore, this self-perception of the dominated classes is a result of their low self-esteem which is in turn a result of the inculcation of the dominant ideology working class parents have experienced throughout their lifetime. Thus, their difficulty in relating to teachers, described as a lack of communication by the teachers (thus legitimating the lack of collaboration) and as a cause of failure by the parents, is in actual fact a result of the latter's internalisation of the dominant ideology inculcated in them by the pedagogic transmitters.

4.4.4 Conclusion

The fact that so much is said about teachers shows "that parents perceive the teacher as a very powerful agent who can improve the children's achievements" (Bar-Tal & Guttmann, 1981, p. 309). Their actions and attitudes are seen to bear heavily on failure which they are supposed to prevent but which they seem to be enabling by serving as transmitters of the dominant ideology rather than as tools for transformation.

4.5 Educational System-Related Attributions

Attributions related to the educational system may be divided into those at the *school level* and those at the *national level*. The latter category involves the Department and Ministry of Education and national educational processes and procedures.

4.5.1 School Level

On a school level, the parents attributed failure to three factors: (a) school prestige, (b) discipline in school, and (c) headteacher attitudes.

The importance given to school prestige was mentioned in interviews 6 and 9 where the children had attended an independent private school and a Church school respectively. The emphasis on school prestige led to the selection of the best pupils and the "cooling out" (Sultana, 1997, p. 88) of the rest. This was especially clear in interview 9 where the mother mentioned the strong emphasis that was placed on prizes awarded for academic achievement, and which led her to ask why other qualities were not rewarded as well. The situation was similar in interview 6 where it was said that children were so selected as to leave only the best pupils in Year 6, all of whom pass the Junior Lyceum examination. Thus the school could boast that all (sic) its students pass the Junior Lyceum examination! Therefore, as a result of this emphasis on prestige, all those who are weak are bound to fail.

Lack of discipline at school was seen to be conducive to failure through the indirect link with truancy since this is most frequent in schools which lack effective disciplinary measures (interview 5).

The other attribution concerned headteachers' attitudes, mostly lack of acceptance. This was the case with two of the participants whose children suffered from learning difficulties. In the case of interview 7 the child, who suffered from autism, was forced to go to a special school after not being accepted at school. In the second case (interview 9) the child's hyperactive behaviour was not understood and he was forced to conform to what the other students did. The headmistress even tried to send him to a special school. The reason for this lack of acceptance was, after all, school prestige as the headmistress had told the teachers to focus on "iż-żwiemel" *["the clever ones"]* and not to waste time on the weak pupils. As a result of this discrimination, academically weak children underachieved.

Looking at these attributions from Bourdieu's perspective, one notes that the emphasis on prestige and the subsequent focusing on the academically best pupils is a result of the distinction created among the possession of different cultural capital, and thus, the prestige of possessing cultural capital that is valued by the school's – and therefore dominant – habitus. Therefore, when parents attribute failure to the schooling system, although not in an explicit way, they are attributing their children's failure to the rejection and invalidation of their class habitus which does not tally with the dominant – and school – habitus.

This means that the pedagogic transmitters are required to focus on "iż-żwiemel" *["the clever ones"]*, that is, those who possess the cultural capital valued by the school, and to help in their accumulation of cultural capital, while preventing the appropriation of such cultural capital by the dominated by not providing them with the necessary tools of appropriation and by devaluing their cultural capital and making them feel responsible for their failure, thus lowering their self-esteem.

4.5.2 National Level

The heaviest criticism by the parents was that of the educational system, describing it as a "sistema mmuffata!" *["outdated system!"]* (interview 6). The educational system was criticised mostly as being one that discriminates in favour of the privileged and against the dominated, thus going against its educational (but not sociological) aims. Therefore, it was seen as a main cause of failure. The criticism levelled at the educational system echoes that in the book "Lettera a Una Professoressa" *["Letter to a teacher"]* (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996) written, with the help of Don Lorenzo Milani, by a number of children who had failed at school, and where "quell' aborto che voi chiamate scuola" *["that kind of abortion which you call schooling"]* (Scuola di Barbiana, p. 32) is seen as "un ospedale che cura i sani e respinga i malati" *["a hospital that cures the healthy and rejects the sick"]* (Scuola di Barbiana, p. 20).

Examinations

Examinations were not seen as a direct cause of failure but as a means through which other factors cause failure. Disability resulted in failure because examinations were not adapted to disabled children's needs (interview 1). Sickness, both during the scholastic year and during the examination period resulted in failure precisely because there were examinations (interviews 6 & 8). Failure could result from teachers retaliating against parents by using examination marks (interview 11). A low self-esteem led to failure because of fear of examinations, so much so that one parent, when speaking about the effect examinations had on her son, said that "bil-lejl anqas kien jorqod, għax għada għandu l-eżami. Għax jibża'." *["at night he wouldn't even sleep, because on the morrow he would have the exam. Because he's afraid."]* (interview 12) If teachers are incompetent, children will surely fail in examinations (interviews 3 & 6). Thus

failure is not attributed to examinations as such but to the latter's association with other factors. However, this does not mean that examinations are not to blame, especially since examination results bring about a lowering of self-esteem (interview 13) if the child fails, leading to a greater fear of examinations due to a negative affective response (Said, 1994) and the undermining of one's potential (McCulloch, 1998), leading to a higher probability of failure. Moreover, examinations facilitate the streaming process (interview 3) which brings about, and ensures, failure.

Looking at this from the conflict theorists' point of view, examinations are legitimating mechanisms (Bourdieu, 1974) of the meritocratic ideology, whereby the cultural arbitrary imposed by the dominant class is seen as neutral and legitimate (Bourdieu, 1976b). Examinations are a socially approved means of testing for the inculcation of the dominant pedagogic action transmitted by the teachers (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) serving the dominant ideology. In this way, and especially through the streaming process, examinations conceal their social reproductive function and thus the reproductive function of the educational system (Bourdieu & Passeron). That parents misrecognise the reproductive function of examinations can be seen in the fact that they do not see examinations as being a direct *cause* of failure but as being a *means* through which other factors bring about failure, thus legitimating examinations as an objective means of assessment.

Streaming

The process that received most criticism by the parents was that of streaming. According to the mother in interview 12, had the child been placed in a mixed ability class he would have performed better. This blames the child's failure on streaming. Parents look down upon the lower streams, calling the F stream "l-aħar klassi" *["the most backward class"]* (interview 3). Their perception usually stems from the fact that such classrooms are usually characterised by severe demotivation and misbehaviour as can be seen in the following comment: "'E' jew 'F' hi naqra gravi, naraha jien! Għax ikun hemm tfal inqarbin iktar, bħal speċi ma jistax jitla' aktar" *["'E' or 'F' is a bit serious, I think! Because there will be children who are more troublesome, and so he wouldn't be able to improve"]* (interview 8).

Secondly, there is the problem of the quality of teaching that takes place in these classes. Parents complained that children who underachieved were given the worst teachers (interviews 4 & 13). The father in interview 13 objects to this and says that "it-tfal li huma inqas tajbin għandu jkollhom *l-aqwa*, l-aqwa teachers." *["the children who do worse should have* the best, *the best teachers."]* Sultana (1991) argues that the situation is intended to maximise the number of passes into the Junior Lyceums. The effect of assigning teachers in this way is the differential socialisation of different streams according to their achievement and therefore cultural capital possession, which contributes to the reproduction of the existing social structure.

Another factor which causes failure and which influences greatly the selection of children into the lower streams is teacher incompetence, as mentioned in interviews 3, 6, and 12. More so, children in the lower streams who misbehaved due to their rebellion against the school culture are made to waste most of their time outside class as seen in section 4.4.3.

Apart from the usual streaming process in Year 4, some schools (as in the case of interview 6 where the children were sent to an independent private school) start their "selection"[13] in Year 1: "Minn Year one jibdew jaraw min huma ż-żwiemel, u ż-żwiemel sew iġifieri, żwiemel tajbin, u they start chopping the others" *["As from Year one they start seeing who are the clever ones, and I mean the really clever ones, very clever ones, and they start chopping the others"]* (interview 6). In this way the school ends up with the highest achievers thus increasing the school's prestige.

Half of the participants said that the effect of streaming is disastrous to the children, mostly because it lowers their self-esteem since they learn that they are educational failures (McCulloch, 1998). One must however keep in mind that such failure is due to differences in habitus not ability, and therefore streaming becomes the selection and separation of different social classes according to their class habitus (Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992). Such a process is "institutionalised violence" (Curtis, et al., 1992, p. 99) which enables the exchange of social hierarchies into educational hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1974) resulting in inequalities in school (Bowles, 1976) and the ensuing reproduction of the social structure.

[13] This is how the father in interview 6 referred to the streaming process.

However, as was mentioned by the parents and by McCulloch (1998), it is the teachers' attitudes towards the C and D streams and the underestimation of these pupils, rather than the streaming process itself, that widens the gap between high and low achievers. Thus, streaming can serve its social reproductive function only if the teachers, through their attitudes, act as pedagogic transmitters of the dominant cultural arbitrary. As long as this takes place, streaming and examinations will result in a lowering of self-esteem and in an increase in "anti-school culture" (Sultana, 1991, p. 246) bringing about underachievement, thus fulfilling the examinations' legitimating function.

To solve the problem of streaming, parents suggested that children who underachieve should be given preferential treatment by being given more personal attention by teachers either by distributing the children of the lowest stream in different classes of the same year group, or by increasing the number of teachers per class (discussed later).

Increase in content

Another factor related to the educational system, which is seen as contributing to failure is the increase in content of the primary level syllabus (interviews 6 & 13). Having large quantities of material to study leads to a lot of pressure and stress, sometimes even leading to the administration (not stated whether through medical prescription) of tranquillisers to primary school children (interview 1). The result of such pressure is failure.

Pupil to teacher ratio

Personal attention, as mentioned above in the case of streaming, is of utmost importance. Lack of personal attention was seen as being conducive to (not a *cause* of) failure and parents suggested decreasing the pupil to teacher ratio, either by increasing the number of teachers per class (interviews 3 & 6), or by decreasing the number of students per class (interviews 4 & 6), something also suggested in the article "Initiatives for Improving Student Achievement" (1997). This suggestion was emphasised especially for the lower streams which need a lot of personal attention (interview 11).

Education Division

The parents also attributed failure to the Education Division because of its lack of support (interviews 1, 3 & 12). In interview 1 it was reported that no help was provided to enable an epileptic child to sit for his exams. The mother in interview 3 complained that her child would have been helped much more had he been given a facilitator. The one who sounded distressed most about the situation was the mother in interview 12, whose child had been diagnosed in need of assistance by the Child Development Assessment Unit, who asked me: "Għaliex it-tifel ħiereġ mill-Primarja u għajnuna għadni ma sibthiex? X'irrid nagħmel?" *["Why is it that my son is finishing Primary and I still have found no help? What am I supposed to do?"].*

Another complaint about the Education Division regarded decisions taken as regards the use of English in schools. The mother in interview 2 criticised the Division for introducing English suddenly, during a particular academic year, rather than gradually over a number of years in the primary level. Since most of the children are not accustomed to the language and academic material is mostly in English, children are not able to understand and, therefore, fail. This is an example of how the educational system favours the cultural and linguistic capital of the dominant class by establishing this as the valid and official culture of the school, and makes the dominated classes feel that they fail due to their deficiency and inability, rather than due to them having a different culture which is not valued by the system and which does not include English as a necessary language.

4.5.3 Conclusion

Parents see the educational system as being responsible for their children's failure because, at school level – involving prestige, discipline and headteacher attitudes – and at national level – through the processes of streaming and examinations, increase in syllabus content, teacher-pupil ratios, and matters concerning the Education Division – children are forced to go through a system where the "winning for some presupposes and ensures that others lose" (Reay & Ball, 1997, p. 96).

4.6 Conclusion

External parental attributions are related to: (a) parents themselves, especially their attitudes; (b) teachers, especially their attitudes and behaviour towards children and parents; (c) the educational system, most notably, examinations and streaming, and the Education Division; and (d) other external factors, mainly bullying and luck.

Parents attributed failure mostly to the educational system and the teachers. This goes against Lareau's (1987, 1989) findings that only upper-middle class parents blame the schools since working class parents are intimidated by the system. At the same time, the parents *are* intimidated by the system because even when they point out factors that cause failure, and when they expose the power relations in school, they still feel powerless when confronted with the system due to the process of reification. In this way, the legitimating and social reproductive mechanisms of schooling are left untouched since, although the parents criticise the actions and attitudes of the teachers and the educational system, they fail to make the link between the power relations at school and the power relations of, and the symbolic violence exerted by, the social formation. Thus for example, the parents interpret anti-school behaviour as the children's rebellion against the way they are treated at school or at home, when at a deeper level, it is a result of the difference that exists between the school habitus and the child's habitus, and the frustration resulting: (a) from the inability of the dominated class to appropriate the schools' cultural capital since it is not provided with the necessary tools of appropriation; and (b) from the invalidation of the dominated class' cultural capital.

Also important to note is that parents link external attributions to internal attributions, mostly self-esteem and motivation. Although some external attributions are seen to bring about failure in a direct way, others are seen as indirect causal factors of failure since they affect self-esteem and motivation which in turn bring about failure.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion of This Study

Whereas other studies have shown that parents attribute failure to internal factors (Gama & de Jesus, 1991; Said, 1994) or to external factors (Bar-Tal & Guttmann, 1981), this study has shown that parents attribute failure *both* to internal and to external factors, the main internal attributions being self-esteem and ability.

When failure was attributed to self-esteem, failure was also seen as having an effect on self-esteem, thus creating a vicious circle. Moreover, both self-esteem and achievement were said to affect pupils' motivation which in turn affects the way self-esteem affects achievement. Achievement was also seen to be affected by fear. External factors were seen as either causing achievement directly or, more often, as affecting internal factors (self-esteem and motivation) and thus, indirectly bringing about failure.

Attributions to ability and character, the other internal characteristics, are a result of the internalisation of the symbolic system imposed by the dominant pedagogic action. Domesticated parents who attributed failure to these internal factors participated in the drive of orthodoxy and therefore adopted the blame-the-victim approach which they had internalised as a result of the naturalisation process legitimised by the meritocratic ideology through the educational system.

On the other hand, those parents who attributed failure to external factors and who linked these to internal factors were those who had not completely internalised the symbolic systems of the dominant pedagogic action. They were

parents who were feeling that there was something wrong with the system that was affecting their children's achievement, their self-esteem and their motivation. Thus these parents were slowly revealing the symbolic violence that had been exerted on them. They also linked the legitimating function of the educational system with its effect on their children's self-esteem. This they did by perceiving legitimation, and therefore pedagogic work, as taking place through the lowering of self-esteem. Such parents refused to adopt the blame-the-victim attitude. Those who were involved in community empowerment projects (as in the case of interview 6) were even more aware of this. This implies that parents have the potential to unmask the social reproductive function of the educational system, and that they can achieve this more fully if they are empowered. This can be seen in the parents' demand for a different type of education for children who underachieve. Through this demand the parents are actually asking the educational system to acknowledge their culture as different but valuable, rather than as invalid and valueless.

Therefore, although domesticated parents attributed failure to internal factors only, due to their internalisation of the dominant ideology, other parents refuted this ideology by attributing failure to external factors which in turn affect, and naturalise and legitimate, the attribution to internal factors.

The interrelationship among these major attributions can be seen in figure 17.

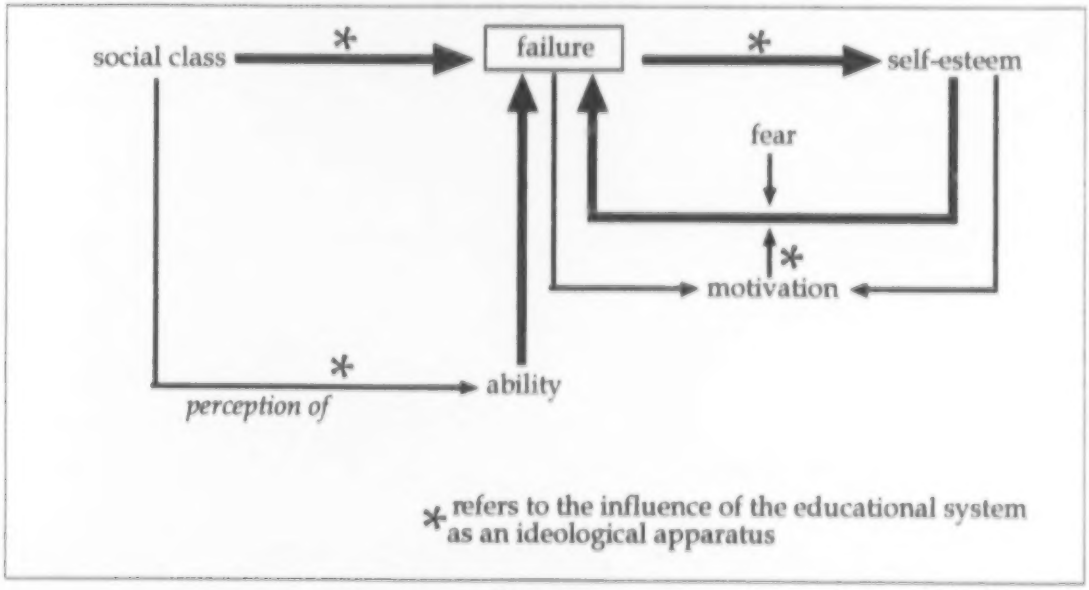


Figure 17
Simplified inter-relationship among the major attributions for failure.

This study indicates that the educational system is involved in the production of failure since it is one of the main ideological apparata used in cultural domination and social reproduction. This it does by influencing the way social class affects achievement and parents' perceptions of ability, and by influencing the children's motivation and affective responses which affect their self-esteem through pedagogic work. This makes one ask the following questions about the Maltese educational system:

- Whose culture is the educational system valuing and transmitting?
- Is teacher training being carried out in such a way so as not to produce pedagogic transmitters who serve the dominant culture?
- Are teachers monitored in such a way as to prevent behaviour mentioned by the participants, such as hitting and name-calling, from occurring? Is in-service training aimed also at motivating teachers to decrease such behaviour? Is discharging of teachers who repetitively behave as mentioned above possible, on a practical level?
- Are streaming and examinations effective ways of educating and assessing children or are these tools used in cultural and social reproduction and its naturalisation and legitimation?
- Is a positive relationship being built up with parents coming from the dominated classes, or are these being excluded because of their "deficient" cultural capital?

5.2 Limitations of This Study

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the participants were not selected using school examination results due to lack of collaboration by the schools. Instead, the sampling was made through contacts made through St. Peter Institute. However, there is a positive side to such sampling: the trust shown by the parents was greater than that which would have been shown had I been introduced by the school, since they knew and trusted the director of St. Peter Institute who had introduced me to them.

Since I had to base my sample on personal contacts, I was somewhat limited in the number of participants I could find, thus interviewing thirteen instead of the intended twenty participants. Moreover, variables in the sample varied a lot. Such variations included: sex, age, child ability, school attended, socio-economic status and educational background of the parents (which were usually low except in some cases as in interview 6); and the location of Ħal-Minsi where the participants lived. The only variables that were consistent throughout were the town where the participants lived and the fact that at least one of the children in the family had failed at school.

Another limitation was that I did not have a copy of the children's results. Consequently I could not compare accurately the degree of underachievement of different children. Furthermore, cultural and economic capital, and literacy level, were estimated from what the parents were asked and from what was observed and were not tested for accurately.

A final limitation that could not be controlled was that when parents speak about their children, they show "'positivity' bias" (Miller, 1995, p. 1570). This means that parents tend to excuse their children's behaviour and see them and their actions more positively than they actually are.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

If other studies were to be held in this field I would suggest that research would try to elicit both the attributions for failure and those for success since these attributions vary, as shown in Bar-Tal and Guttman (1981), Said (1994), and Gama and de Jesus (1991).

It would be best for other studies to be more systematic in their sampling by trying to obtain their data from school reports rather than from personal contact as in my case. Moreover, for the research to be more reliable, one should try to find a larger sample than the one in this study.

Other studies should try to be more comparative in nature by taking samples from different towns, different types of schools (state, Church, and independent

private), different social classes, different genders, and different ethnic groups. In such a way one would be better able to obtain a holistic view of parental attributions.

Also, it would be a good idea for research to focus on failure in general, thus including in the sample: teachers, headteachers, pupils, staff from the Education Division, and staff from the Faculty of Education. Classroom ethnography would also be a great contribution in this area.

Finally, other studies can also try to follow students from Year 4 to Form 1 and from Form 4 to after Form 5 so as to observe what happens to students' achievement and to the attributions of parents, in different situations, over a long span of time.

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